University of Alberta

Almadina Charter School: An Assessment

by

Rick J. Angus ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

in

Educational Administration and Leadership

Department of Educational Policy Studies

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 2000

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Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and school board members in regards to how they feel the Almadina Charter School meets the needs of the students enrolled there. More specifically, the purpose was to investigate reasons why Almadina is considered an innovative site for offering ESL programming and the reasons why families opt to have their children attend this school.

A case study approach was used to address the research question. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the principal, staff, students and school board members of the Almadina Charter School. These data were analyzed deductively and inductively.

The findings of this study indicated that although Almadina has had a tumultuous beginning it now appears to be providing the innovative ESL programming identified in the charter mandate.

Recommendations for practice have been made regarding how Almadina can better prepare itself for charter renewal come June, 2001.

Acknowledgements

This study could not have been conducted without the guidance and support of several people.

I wish to sincerely thank Dr. Frank Peters for his invaluable advice, commitment, and outstanding encouragement throughout this study. This document would not have been completed on time without his support. I would also like to express my appreciation to the members of my examination committee for the time they have committed to this study; Dr. David Wangler and Dr. Dave Sande. Gratitude is further expressed to Dr. Jose da Costa whose guidance and support in the initial stages of my research allowed me to be where I am today.

Appreciation is also conveyed to the principal, staff, students and school board members of the Almadina Charter School for their cooperation in participating in this research. A further note of gratitude goes out to the superintendent of the Almadina Charter School, Mr. George Pinchbeck and to Dr. Hetty Roessingh for their useful insights regarding Almadina.

Finally, a sincere thank you to my wife and best friend Kathy for the many sacrifices she has made throughout this past year, to my daughters Kendra and Lara, and to my good friends and in-laws Brian and Susan Lynn. Your continuous support and encouragement will be forever treasured.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my late father, Jack Angus. I wish you could be here to witness what an influence you had, and continue to have in my life.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Background

The Almadina Charter School, after receiving its Charter from the Minister of Education in June, 1996, commenced operation in September of the same year and was established in response to the learning needs of a group of students perceived to be marginalized in mainstream or "regular" school settings. The school, located in the former Victoria Community school building in south-east Calgary, currently services 285 students in grades one through nine. Many of these students had previously attended various schools within the Calgary Board of Education (CBE) system and the majority of Almadina's students are from Arabic speaking homes.

The mission of Almadina is dedicated to serving the learning needs of all students who choose to enroll there, with special emphasis on English as a Second Language proficiency. The hope is to create an integrated, connected learning environment for the development of English language proficiency, so that students can successfully move on to participate equally with English speaking students in mainstream schools outside of the Almadina Charter School.

Three features of the Almadina Charter School characterize its uniqueness as an English as a Second Language (ESL) charter school: (a) it has a structured ESL program at all levels of ESL proficiency, (b) it maintains a strong "language across the curriculum" focus, whereby all learning settings are seen as venues for the development of English language proficiency, and (c) it offers a Heritage Language program that addresses the Charter stipulation that Heritage Languages be offered in support of the development of English language proficiency.

Since its inception in 1996 Almadina has experienced a tumultuous history, reflected in high turnover rates among administration and teaching staff, an ESL program which did not appear to be meeting the mandate of the school, and decreasing percentages of students achieving Acceptable Standards and Standards of Excellence in the Provincial Achievement exams. In 1999, a School Growth Team was asked by the Superintendent of Schools of Almadina Charter School to examine the effectiveness of the school in meeting the educational needs of its students and the provisions of its Charter. Their School Growth Report, submitted on May 31, 1999 identified a number of areas for improvement and recommendations for future growth. A Follow-up Action Plan to the School Growth Report was implemented at the onset of the 1999-2000 school year and indications are that all stakeholders involved in the Almadina Charter School are working hard at meeting the original mandate proposed in the school's charter.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and school board members--many of whom are also parents in the school--in regards to how they feel the Almadina Charter School meets the needs of the students enrolled there. More specifically, the purpose was to investigate reasons why Almadina is considered an innovative site for offering ESL programming and the reasons why families opt to have their children attend this school rather than attend "traditional" public or separate schools which may be closer to their homes. The intent of this study was to provide a thick description of the perceptions held by the principal, staff, students and school board members. This was achieved by drawing on their experiences at the Almadina Charter School as well as their experiences, if any, with ESL programs with other public or separate school boards.

Identification of the Problem

This study was designed to address the research question: What are the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and school board members in regards to how they feel the Almadina Charter School meets the needs of the students enrolled there?

Sub-Problems

Four more specific questions were also meant to be addressed within the scope of this larger question:

1. What are the needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) students?
2. What do each of these interest groups perceive themselves to be doing to meet the pupil's needs?
3. How are these actions different from what is being done at other schools?
4. How is the Almadina Charter School an innovative site for providing ESL programming?

Definition of Terms

The following definitions of terms are provided to help the reader understand how they were used for the purposes of this study.

1. "**Perceptions**" describe the intuitive judgment of those individuals participating in this study.

2. For the purpose of this study, members of the **staff** recruited for research purposes will be from the 18 full time teachers and three full time language instructors who have taught at the Almadina Charter School for at least one full school year.

3. For the purpose of this study, **student participants** will be from the division three level, grades seven, eight, or nine, who have been enrolled at Almadina since at least the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year.

4. For the purpose of this study, participants from the **school board** will be recruited from the current seven members; at least two of these will be parents.

5. A **charter school** as defined by Alberta Education (1996) is: (a) an autonomous public school which provides innovative or enhanced means of delivering education to improve student learning, (b) a public school providing a basic education in a different or enhanced way to improve student learning, and (c) one which must

demonstrate the potential to improve the learning of students.

Significance of the Study

In qualitative research, the researcher hopes to bring a case to life in a way that is not possible using the statistical methods of quantitative research (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996, p. 585). Thus it is hoped that this study will provide initial insights into the effectiveness of the Almadina Charter School as an innovative site for offering ESL programming and that this study may provide public or separate school boards with some programming alternatives which may compliment their existing ESL services, especially those with large ESL populations. From my main research as a whole, my intent was that successful innovative practices would be identified so that the needs of ESL students, especially those at risk of not completing their schooling, could be recognized and adopted by schools experiencing difficulties in meeting the needs of their ESL populations. I also hope that this research will contribute to what appears to be a somewhat limited bank of knowledge about charter schools here in Alberta, the nature of ESL programs offered here in Canada and, how these programs are meeting the needs of students at risk of not completing their schooling.

Organization of the Thesis

The balance of this thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter Two provides an overview of the literature with emphasis on Charter Schools, the status of ESL programming in Canada and ESL Students at Risk. Chapter Three describes the research methodology used. This section recounts research design, a description of the sample and target populations as well as an overview of data analysis techniques used. The fourth chapter describes the findings, while chapter five provides a discussion of the findings in relation to recommendations made in the Growth Report (1999) and to the literature. Chapter six provides a summary of the research problem and sub problems, an interpretation of my findings as well as conclusions reached and recommendations made.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of the literature provides an overview of how the Almadina school sees itself meeting the programming needs of the ESL students enrolled there. It summarizes information gained from recent literature on the role of charter schools in Alberta, the status of ESL programming in Canada, and the risks that ESL students face in not completing their schooling. This review set the context for my study which is to examine the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and school board members in regards to how they feel the Almadina Charter School is meeting the needs of the ESL students enrolled there.

The Almadina Charter school, located in Calgary, Alberta, is an institution that believes the English as a Second Language (ESL) students have a greater chance of success if they are instructed by staff members who are qualified to teach ESL and who are familiar with the students' first language. Consequently, Almadina welcomes students from anywhere in the world who are either new to Canada or who were born in Canada but whose language spoken in the home is other than English. It should be noted that little research regarding ESL schools and how they meet students needs appears to exist in current or past literature and the Almadina school is the only one of its kind that, to my knowledge, exists in Canada. Literature does exist however on the role of Charter schools in Alberta today in terms of how they are governed and what they hope to accomplish. There are also a number of studies which, given the number of immigrants and refugees who arrive in Canada each year, suggest a need for increased ESL programming and support for ESL students, whether through schools such as the Almadina Charter school or through "traditional" Public or Separate schools themselves. Finally, although literature found regarding how at risk ESL students are of not completing their schooling tends to be conflicting, there appears to be clear evidence that ESL students entering high school, especially those who have no English background whatsoever, are at a much greater risk of dropping out of high school than the high school population as a whole.

Charter Schools in Alberta

In order to understand the objectives of the Almadina Charter School it is important to understand the role of Charter schools themselves. In 1994, under Alberta's then Minister of Education Halvar Johnson, this province became the first in Canada to enact charter school legislation. This legislation, known as Bill 19 or the School Amendment Act, provided for a number of changes to the existing School Act. In introducing the bill before the legislature in March of 1994, Johnson pointed out that "the most significant changes relate to the refinancing of education.... and the increase in local decision making through school-based management and charter schools" (cited in McConahy,1996, p. 580). Thus as McConahy (1996) notes, "Bill 19 was proclaimed into law in May 1994, making Alberta the first province to take such a bold initiative" (p. 580).

This charter school legislation, contrary to popular belief, is quite restrictive in nature. It permits only a limited number of charter schools (in Alberta the cap is currently 15) within a limited term in which to operate (in Alberta again, charters are subject to renewal every 3-5 years). Bosetti (1998) also reminded us that only "local school boards or the Minister of Education may grant charters"(p.19), and that "the schools must operate under the provisions of the School Act" (p. 19). She goes on to add that "the government does not provide for start up funds, nor does it make provisions to help charter schools fund and maintain facilities" (p.19). Bosetti stated that charter schools are only on the expansive end of legislation in "permitting a variety of operators (individuals or groups, and non-profit organizations), allowing existing private schools to convert to charter schools and in providing the same per-pupil operating grants as regular schools" (p. 19). She also noted that, while technical support for charter schools is minimal, "charter schools have formed a provincial association and Alberta Education is now providing limited in-service training for charter school board members" (p.19). (For an overview of how charter schools are established, see Appendix A).

How these and future charter schools in Alberta are structured is outlined by Peters and Arruda (1998). They noted that "all charter schools in Alberta are similar in that they: (a) follow the Alberta Education Program of Studies and students write provincial achievement tests and diploma exams, (b) must not be affiliated with a religious faith or denomination except provided in the School Act, (c) are non-profit and can not charge tuition fees" (p.3). This is expanded upon in Alberta Education's Charter School Handbook (cited in *Behind the Charter School Myths*, 1997) which states:

- parents, teachers or other citizens can apply for charter through a local school board- if they are turned down by the board, they can appeal directly to the minister of education (as was the case for the Almadina Charter School in Calgary)
- no special start-up, capital or transportation funds are available; once approved, the school is entitled to the same per pupil funding as a regular school
- while schools cannot charge tuition fees, "voluntary" fees can be charged for fund-raising purposes
- schools must be open to all students as stipulated in the Alberta School Act; however, "if student enrollment exceeds program capacity, the school will select students in accordance with the selection process outlined in the charter." (Alberta Education, 1995, p.14)-selection criteria must be included in any proposed charter
- teachers must hold a valid Alberta Teachers Certificate, but teachers are not 'active members' of the [Alberta Teachers' Association]; they can hold associate membership in the Alberta Teachers' Association and are eligible to contribute to

the teachers' pension fund

- a charter school may have its charter revoked if it does not follow the requirements of the legislation, or if the school is not succeeding according to its own goals (p. 6).

There have been some changes in regards to financing and charter schools which recently proves significant for charter school operation. Bosetti, Foulkes, O'Reilly and Sande (2000) noted that, in February 1999, "the Minister announced measures to provide for funding for leasing and in some cases, for capital expenditures" (p. 114). As the cost of leasing their facilities ranges from 10% to 15% of their total operations budget, Bosetti et al. added "These measures will serve to increase the amount of funds available for instructional purposes in most [charter] schools" (p. 115). Additional costs not incurred by other schools such as superintentency fees, transportation costs and outside evaluation and assessment still provide substantial handicaps however to the everyday operations of these charter schools.

In terms of governance, a charter board should be represented by teachers, parents, and community members. Peters and Arruda (1998) again noted that "specifically, the charter itself must define the charter board: its membership, roles and responsibilities of the members and it must describe how they are to be selected" (p.4). They went on to add that "the school council must describe the parameters within which the school council will operate and the councils' roles and responsibilities. The focus and philosophy is expected to set the direction of the school" (p. 4).

The purposes of charter schools, as reported by Bosetti (1998a) are "as an addition to the public system as sites of innovation that would compliment the educational services provided by the local public system" (p.65). She went on to add that "they are meant to provide the opportunity for successful educational practices to be recognized and adapted by other public schools for the benefit of more students" (p.65). Bierlein and Mulholland (1995) emphasized the contractual and autonomous features of charter schools in that:

> In its purest form a charter school is an autonomous educational entity operating under a contract negotiated between the *organizers* who manage the school (teachers, parents, or others from the public or private sector), and the *sponsors* who oversee the provisions of the charter (local school boards, state education boards, or some other public authority (p.34).

Similarly in Alberta, the *Charter School Handbook* (1996) presented the purpose of charter schools here in Alberta as the following:

> Charter schools in Alberta are expected to provide a different educational environment to improve student learning. The intent goes beyond simply creating a few new or alternative school programs. Therefore, charter schools will have flexibility and considerable autonomy to implement innovative or enhanced educational services which will broaden the range of educational opportunities and enhance student learning. Enhanced student learning means improved acquisition, in some measurable way, of skills, attitudes and knowledge. (p.2).

Bosetti (1998), in her first year report of a two-year in-depth study of charter schools in Alberta further characterized what is happening in Alberta charter schools. She found in her examination of the existing nine charter schools that: (a) school size varies from fewer than 70 students to over 300, (b) class sizes are small, (c) enrollment is increasing and retention rates are high overall, (d) most are located in large urban centres, (e) half are newly formed schools; the remainder derive from pre-existing programs, (f) most are housed in leased buildings and, (g) the Minister of Education now sponsors most charters; only two schools are currently hosted by a local school board. (p.vi). She went on to point out that over half the schools serve a particular population or need such as high risk, English as a second language (ESL) students, or gifted students, and that half the schools "employ a particular methodology, educational philosophy, or curricular focus above the core curriculum" (p. vi).

Wagner (1999) identified that "although Alberta is unique in the sense of being the only Canadian province to have charter schools, the idea for charter schools came from other jurisdictions" (p. 64). He cited that after "jumping to North America" in 1991 as a result of reforms in Great Britain and New Zealand, the charter idea "spread north across the border to the province of Alberta" (p. 64). It appears from the literature that having grown out of the same movement, the challenges facing charter schools in Alberta are similar to those currently being experienced in the United States.

Hadderman (1998) reported that "most new charters are plagued by resource limitations, particularly inadequate startup funds" (p. 3). This observation was reiterated in the U.S. National Study on Charter Schools (1999) which stated, "most charter schools continue to cite resource limitations as a serious implication difficulty" (p. 9). Bosetti et al.(2000) in their final report on charter schools in Alberta also noted:

> The issue of securing appropriate and affordable school facilities has been one of the biggest obstacles facing charter schools. Due to a lack of capital funding, charter schools report that 10-15% of their operating budgets is devoted to obtaining school facilities, a cost not borne to other public schools. This absence of capital funding has also impaired the long-term planning for school expansion and affected teachers' salaries and charter schools' commitment to small class sizes. Charter schools have not operated on a level financial playing field with other public schools (p. 171).

The U.S. National Study on Charter Schools (1999) cited that "about 3 of 10 charter schools that were formerly public schools reported that state or local board opposition or regulations presented obstacles to their school's implementation" (p. 9). Bosetti et al. (2000) also cited this as a challenge faced by Alberta charter schools:

> Related to the granting of charters is the problem of local school boards' unwillingness to sponsor charter schools...This resistance by local school boards creates a tremendous challenge for charter schools. It has the effect of delaying the process of establishing a charter school, it requires proponents to shop around for school boards, and it creates tension between local school boards and charter schools (p. 170).

This is supported by Peters and Arruda (1998) who noted that "the requirement that strong local support be present would be seen as a clear constraint on activity relating to starting charter schools" (p. 5).

Gardner (1999) suggested that in the United States, "even though many charter schools have a clear vision of what they want to do educationally and have committed and experienced staff and parents, they lack the business experience to make implementation successful" (p. 11).

Again Bosetti et al. (2000) mentioned this in regards to Alberta's charter schools:

> The charter school movement allows people without formal training, experience or expertise to create and govern charter schools. The result is that the innovations may be poorly planned and ill-conceived, or they may be an innovation that is rejected by the formally trained and experienced education community (p. 170).

They further added that, "it is apparent that those charter schools in our study that are most successful had their charter developed by people with educational expertise and a proven track record in operating schools" (p. 170).

A final challenge facing charter schools in both Alberta and in the United States is regarding student assessment. As Gardner (1999) reported:

> Accountability for student achievement and the schools' operation to district or state sponsors, while much emphasized, is often difficult to achieve in practice. Many schools do not have the funds or resources to conduct comprehensive student assessments and many states do not specify what standardized assessment instruments are to be used (p. 11).

This reflects observations made by Bosetti et al. (2000) who also noted:

> The problem is that there has not been a clear definition of what should constitute 'student learning' or 'improvement'. Many charters have been established to address the expected level of achievement for students with particular needs (i.e. gifted, talented, academically at-risk, underachieving, ESL learners). Without clearer expectations and criteria set up front, evaluating performance remains a challenge (p. 165).

There are additional challenges which Alberta's charter schools have faced since their early years of development. Bosetti et al.(2000) further identified a lack of leadership from Alberta Learning resulting from "the continual shifting of responsibility for charter schools within the Ministry" (p. 167). They expanded upon this comment by further adding, "charter schools were born out of the desire of the government, yet there was little attention given to who would be responsible for their upbringing" (p. 167). This is again supported by Peters and Arruda (1998) who noted that, "other than being favorably disposed towards charter schools in general philosophical terms, neither the government nor the ministry of education have appeared as strong advocates of the charter movement" (p. 6).

Despite these challenges however, Bosetti (1998) noted that "the resilience of Alberta's first charter schools is impressive. Although not without casualties, they have taken hold despite little financial, moral, or technical support" (p. x). Bosetti et al. (2000) further added in their final report that to date, "the key challenge for charter schools is to document and communicate their innovative practices and successes with the larger education community, and to continue to define their niche in the public education system" (p. 175). Bosetti (1998) noted that many of the questions about charter schools in Alberta still remain unanswered yet, "it is evident that charter schools could be more successful in achieving their intended missions in future if the regulatory climate and technical assistance were improved to provide a more level playing field and adequate support" (p. x). Their future, as Bosetti et al. (2000) noted, "is very much in the hands of the government" (p.159).

There appears to be a great amount of debate in the literature regarding weaknesses in charter school legislation in terms of its support for charter school philosophy but it is not my intent to address these concerns as part of this review. The fact that the Almadina school, with a population of approximately 300 students and a waiting list for students to get in indicates to me that this charter school appears to be addressing a perceived need and is worthy of further study.

ESL in Canada

In terms of ESL programming, population demographics in Canada in respect to immigration trends appear to indicate that this is an area we need to concern ourselves with. Roessingh (1999) cited immigration statistics from various sources (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1985; Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, 1995; Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1997) as reflecting "three significant trends that have an impact on ESL programming" (p. 72).

She noted that the first trend has been "a shift from refugee class to independent class immigrants" resulting from the federal government's plan "to recruit and select business immigrants in recognition of their significant economic benefit to Canada" (p. 72). Roessingh added that "independent class immigrants are assessed for immigration according to a point system that takes into account factors such as education and knowledge of English" (p. 72). The second trend Roessingh identified dealt with the cultural background of these newly arrived immigrants. She stated that "although there is still diversity among the new immigrants of the 1990's, Hong Kong now far outstrips any other country as a source of origin for new Canadians" (p. 72). The impact on our province she claimed was that of the 44,174 citizens which emigrated from Hong Kong between 1984 and 1994, Alberta received 4,005 of these immigrants" (p. 73). The final trend described by Roessingh addressed the increased numbers of immigrants themselves. She cited that "in the mid-1980s, Canada's immigration target was approximately 110,000 (Employment and Immigration, 1985). By the mid 1990s, the immigration target was set at approximately 225,000 (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1997)" (p.73). Figures published by Statistics Canada reflect Roessingh's findings. Of Canada's total immigrant population of 4, 971,070 (1996 Census), it was noted that 2,131,390 or 43% (1996 Census) have only been in Canada since 1981.Of these newly arrived immigrants statistics also show that between the period of 1991-1996, over 592,710 or 57% (1996 Census) came from Middle East and Asian countries.

These findings reflect current trends in Canadian schools across the country. Balcom (1994, cited in Allila & Harvey, 1998), noted "between 1987 and 1993, in the school districts comprising British Columbia's two major metropolitan areas (Vancouver and Victoria), the increase in ESL students ranged from 148% to 2581%" (p. 182). Cole (1998) also reported that "the number of Canadian immigrants more than doubled in the late 1980s, and in the 1990s three-quarters of the immigrant children were school age" (p. 36). Similar findings were found by Ashworth (1988). She stated that "the proportion of ESL students in urban school systems is rapidly increasing (e.g., over 50% in several Metro Toronto systems and almost 47% in the Vancouver school system)" (p. 105). This was supported by Roessingh and Watt (2000) who reported "in large urban centers such as Calgary (Dawson: 1998; Dempster and Alberts: 1998), Toronto (McInnes: 1993) and Vancouver (Rinehard: 1996) between 20% and 50 % of the school population may be comprised of what is broadly referred to as ESL students" (p. 1).

Closer to home, Bosetti and Watt (1995) found that in 1991, Alberta received about 10 percent of the total immigration to Canada. Of these immigrants, "more than 85 percent had a native language other than English and of those half declared they had no English language proficiency" (p.26). They went on to add that "of all those who immigrated to Alberta, about 25 % were school age and had no English language proficiency" (p. 26). They also noted that "in addition to those who immigrate and require English language support, there are a substantial number of Canadian born children of recent immigrants, who have limited or no English language proficiency when they enter the school system in grade one" (p. 26). Thompson (1995) also added that "in Alberta, more than one thousand children each year -- some children born in Canada and some children who are newcomers to Canada -- arrive at school unable to speak English" (p. 5). Thus the need for ESL programs seems obvious. The question is, are we addressing the needs for such programming? Literature would suggest no.

Ashworth (1988) noted that "although formal programs in ESL have been in place in some school districts since the first decade of this century, few research reports dealing with their successes or failures have been published" (p.105). Reports out of Alberta however suggest that we are experiencing difficulty in meeting the needs of ESL students. Bosetti and Watt (1995) commented that "when ESL instruction is not accepted as a basic educational need its services are subject to inequitable reductions. The result tends to be a reduction in qualified ESL teachers" (p. 37). This argument is supported in a report given by the Calgary board of Education (1991, cited in Bosetti and Watt, 1995) which stated, "while a major strength lies with ESL staff, interpreters, caring teachers and continuing education courses, there are not enough trained personnel to deal with the influx of immigrants to the system" (p. 37). Thompson (1995) also supported this by adding:

> The tough economic times and resulting declining educational budgets

> add to the challenge each school board faces to educate all the children within its boundaries. In times such as these, educational programs, including English as a Second Language programs, tend to be trimmed to cut costs. (p. 5)

As Thompson goes on to note "a review of the law in the area of human rights, the *Charter* and education reveals that a student in Alberta who lacks proficiency in English is entitled to an education program appropriate to his or her needs" (p. 20). Based on a review of the literature, it is questionable whether these programs are being provided as effectively as they could be.

ESL Students at Risk

Of the literature found regarding how at risk ESL students are of not completing their schooling, data appear to conflict. For example, Caplan, Choy and Whitmore (1992, cited in Allila and Harvey, 1998) found that, "despite limited knowledge of English, children of Southeast-Asian refugees living in low income, metropolitan areas of the United States quickly adapted to their new schools and began to excel" (p. 183). Another study published by Statistics Canada (1997) that dealt with at-risk students indicated that "recent immigrants aged 10 to 11 scored better on many developmental measures than children who have lived in Canada for more than five years" (p. 7).

Other studies however, especially those dealing with older ESL students, tend to show otherwise. As Collier (1987, cited in Roessingh, 1995) reported, "students arriving between the ages of 12-15 experienced the greatest difficulty and were projected to require as much as 6-8 years to reach grade-level norms in academic achievement when schooled in a second language" (p. 66). Collier (1989) further added that "it may take as long as 7 to 10 years for nonnative speakers to reach the average level of performance by native speakers on standardized tests" (p. 525).

What is more alarming are results cited by Bosetti and Watt (1995). They found in a study of high school dropout rates among ESL students (Watt and Roessingh, 1994), conducted in a single high school with the largest number of funded ESL students in Calgary, "there was a blended dropout rate of 74% for ESL students who entered high school between 1988 and 1993" (p. 29). Furthermore they added that "even considering a more conservative study, conducted by Alberta Education, which calculated the ESL dropout at 61%, it is clear that ESL dropout is cause for educational alarm" (p.29). Bosetti and Watt (1995) also noted that "the disaggregated dropout rates for Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced ESL students, based on their initial placement in the ESL program provides further evidence of an alarming disparity as follows: (a) Beginners had a 94.5% dropout rate, (b) intermediates had a 70% dropout rate, and (c) advanced students had a 50% dropout rate (p.29).

Subsequent studies by Watt, Roessingh and Bosetti (1996), Roessingh (1999), Derwing, DeCorby, Ichikawa and Jamieson (1999) and Roessingh and Watt (2000) substantiated these findings. Watt, Roessingh and Bosetti (1996), reported "some 65% of the beginner students leave within 24 months of enrolling in high school not having acquired basic interpersonal communication skills" (p. 4). Watt and Roessingh (2000) found that in the five years since the publication of their first tracking study on high school ESL student achievement (Watt and Roessingh, 1994), "our earlier general dropout rate of 74% published in 1994 remains essentially unchanged by the addition of the last four years of student intakes" (p. 6). Their Statistics supporting this information has been summarized on the following page. (See table 1).

Table 1: General drop out rate for ESL students 1989-1997

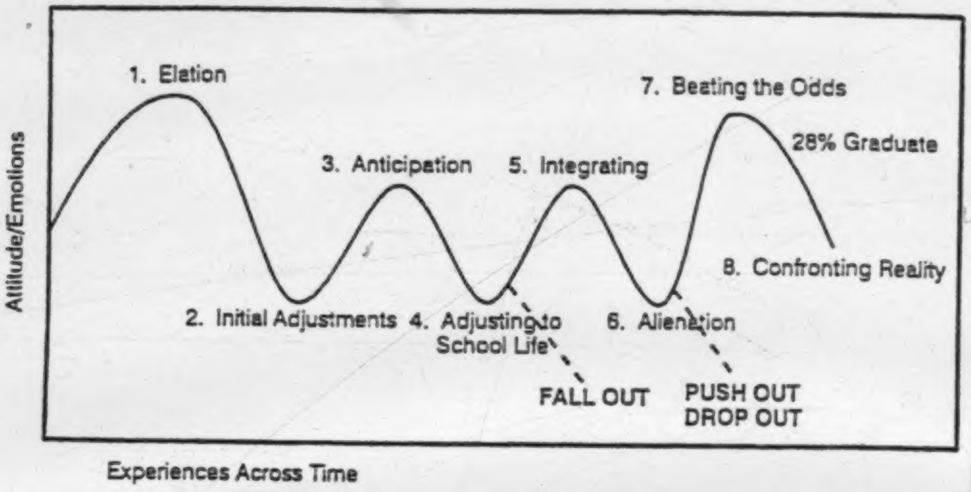
IntakeYear	# of graduates	% of graduates	% of dropout
1989	17/55	31%	69%
1990	24/86	28%	72%
1991	19/94	20%	80%
1992	12/60	20%	80%
1993	17/54	31%	69%
1994	11/55	20%	80%
1995	15/58	26%	76%
1996	13/43	30%	70%
TOTAL	128/505	26%	**74%**

Watt and Roessingh (2000, p. 7)

Further follow-up research to Watt and Roessingh's (1994) study by Derwing, DeCorby, Ichikawa and Jamieson (1999) found a 54% completion rate among ESL students completing high school. They stated that "although higher than the "26% aggregate figure cited in the Calgary study, it is still well below the 70% completion rate for all high school students in Alberta" (p. 543). As Roessingh (1999) summarized, these dropout figures represent an enormous loss of human capital in Canada's future as many of these students are among the strongest academic learners in the school" (p. 74).

In identifying why ESL students represent such a disproportionate percentage of high school dropouts Watt, Roessingh and Bosetti (1996) illustrated eight stages that ESL students appear to pass through when adjusting to school in Canada. (See following page, figure 1).

Figure 1: "Boom and Bust": ESL Students' Educational and Cultural Adjustments to High School.



Watt, Roessingh and Bosetti (1996, p. 204)

Watt et al. cited "adjusting to school life" and "alienation" as the low points where ESL students are most likely to drop out. They summarized, "newly arrived high school students move through predictable patterns of ups and downs. Learning English is the most difficult thing they tell of having to do in making the adjustment to the culture of the school" (p. 219).

Also cited as a contributing factor to high dropout rate among ESL students was the mandatory age cap policy, imposed by Alberta education in 1993. Until then Derwing et al. (1999) noted, "schools tended to turn a blind eye if ESL students were over age. Now however, the year in which a student turns 19 before September 1 is the last school year for which he or she receives funding" (p. 536). They characterized these students as being "push outs" and claimed that these students constitute "10% of those students not completing the requirements [needed to complete high school]" (p. 536). Watt, Roessingh and Bosetti (1996) further illustrated the frustrations felt by many ESL students as a result of being pushed out of the system. They noted that many of these students were academically competent but "they are angry at being denied the opportunity to complete their studies at the school. Most succumb to the barriers of furthering their education raised by having to attend night school or adult upgrading programs in another neighborhood" (p. 213).

The study conducted by Derwing et al. (1999) also highlighted additional reasons which plausibly contribute to the relative dropout rates of ESL students. By conducting semi-structured interviews with fifteen ESL students (seven which had completed school within the school system, eight which had not) they were able to identify topics which students themselves felt inhibited their academic success.

One of these themes was in regards to school relationships. Derwing et al. (1999) reported that of the students interviewed, almost all mentioned that "developing relationships with native English speaking classmates, both socially and academically, was an important contributing factor to a successful school experience" (p. 539). This supported findings by Watt, Roessingh and Bosetti (1996). They also found, through interviews with ESL students who had not completed their schooling, "in retrospect, they also wish they had found the courage to befriend English speaking classmates. They recognize that this may have helped them learn English" (p. 209). Kanno and Applebaum (1995) augmented upon this issue. They reported, "the motivation to learn English among the students depends largely on the degree of their desire to gain entry to the English speaking community in school" (p. 46).

A further theme identified by Derwing et al.(1999) addressed student concerns regarding their academic programming. They found that the ESL students interviewed "expressed dissatisfaction with the need to take ESL courses as a prerequisite and especially disliked not being able to take more content area courses such as math and science" (p. 540). Derwing (1999) further illustrated that the ESL students "expected the ESL courses to be more relevant and related to the content area courses, and they saw the ESL courses as an impediment to achieving their academic goals" (p. 540). Garcia (1991, cited in Roessingh, 1995) supported this claim in reporting, "thematic organization of the curriculum has been consistently identified as a characteristic of successful programs for ESL learners" (p. 74).

A third issue cited by Derwing et al. (1999) related to the stigma that ESL student's perceived as attached to being an ESL learner. Derwing et al. (1999) concluded that, "ESL students do feel stigmatized, both by their teachers and by other students" (p. 544). This was reiterated in findings by Kanno and Applebaum (1995) who posited, "it [the school] is a site of domination because relegating students to ESL programs perpetuates their status as second class citizens of the school and diminishes their motivation to advance their English beyond the level required in the ESL environment" (p. 47). In reporting on racial and ethical tensions in Canadian schools, Thomas and Willinsky (1997) found that student comments reflected "the tensions have less to do with race per se, and more with the immigrant status and language proficiency [of the students]" (p. 367). These insights are deemed important by Zanger (1994, cited in Derwing, 1999). He suggested that "changes in the social context of the school would enhance student's opportunities in experiencing academic success" (p. 544).

In closing, Roessingh (1995) also inferred that, in order to enhance the chances of success for our ESL students, "alternatives to traditional assessment techniques are necessary to be responsive to the changed demographics of the inclusive classroom" (p. 75). Roessingh (1999) augmented upon this comment by suggesting, "ESL students need extra time to process and develop language, to do homework, to write formal exams, to write and rewrite papers, and to manage and pace their work to complete a novel study" (p. 80).

Summary

Thus in light of recent educational cutbacks, reportedly high drop out rates among our ESL students, and a continually growing immigrant population, many of whom are school age, it appears that there should be concern for the current status of ESL programming here in Alberta. In the case of Almadina, these issues are further compounded by the uncertainty regarding our government's commitment to the charter school movement here in Alberta. As noted by Bosetti et al. (2000), "their future is contingent upon the government's desire to provide a regulatory climate in which they can flourish and upon their ability to overcome the resistance created by the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association" (p. 175).

It should be noted that little research regarding ESL schools and how they meet students needs appears to exist in current or past literature and the Almadina school is the only one of its kind that, to my knowledge, exists in Canada. As Dr. Roessingh (personal communication with Hetty Roessingh, 2000) noted "it's a long term idea to work on a charter like Almadina and there isn't one like it". There also appears to be little mention in the literature regarding the uniqueness of delivering ESL programming to one distinct cultural group, which in the case of Almadina, is the Arabic or Muslim population that it serves. Again Dr. Roessingh (personal communication with Hetty Roessingh, 2000) stated, "they're not a bilingual school but there are elements of the program that are like bilingualism". Both of the above points indicate that Almadina, in promoting a unique and innovative ESL program, are to be considered pioneers in their field. This void in the literature inhibits Almadina from drawing on theory or the experiences of others, resulting in a program designed solely by the stakeholders involved in this charter school.

How a school such as Almadina addresses these concerns and how the students, staff and school board members feel that student needs are being met at this school in light of what has been mentioned in the literature will be further examined in this study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

The methodology used in this research was designed to explore the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and school board members in regards to how they feel the Almadina Charter School is meeting the needs of the students enrolled there. The components discussed in this section include (a) type of study, (b) population and respondent group, (c) context of the Almadina Charter School, (d) consent and confidentiality, (e) pilot study, (f) data collection, (g) data analysis, (h) researcher beliefs, (i) trustworthiness, (j) limitations, and (k) delimitations.

Type of Study

This qualitative research took the form of a case study using semi-structured interviews based on the perceptions of students, staff and board members of the Almadina school. The findings are presented based on a combination of reflective and analytic reporting. This allowed for the identification of themes or patterns which emerged as a result of my research. In order to test the viability of this type of study for the main research a pilot study was conducted following which I revised and refined my interview guide. The pilot interview also permitted me to begin identification of emerging themes, and to hone my interviewing skills.

Population and Respondent Group

The target respondent group was the principal, students, staff, and board members, both of whom were parents, of the Almadina Charter School. Parents of Almadina students were purposely omitted from this study after consultation with the school principal who felt that this population, due to English proficiency issues as well as the level of parental involvement in the school, would be very difficult to solicit volunteers from. However two parents who are currently members of Almadina's seven member school board were approached and agreed to participate in my research. The five students who constituted the student respondent group had each been enrolled at Almadina since the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year and they were purposefully selected from only Division three -- grades seven, eight, and nine -- as it was hoped that they would provide a richer description of their experiences in regards to ESL programming. The four teachers who constituted the staff respondent group had all been employed at Almadina for at least one full school year and it was asked that at least two of the teachers were full time ESL instructors as it was again hoped that they would provide a richer description of their experiences in regards to the ESL programming being offered at Almadina. Of the accessible respondent groups, I interviewed the principal, four members from the staff respondent group, five members from the student respondent group and two members of the Almadina School Board respondent group, thus my research was based on the perceptions of twelve individuals. Recruitment of participants was done with the help of the principal who ensured that no volunteer would be coerced in any way into participating in this study .

Context of Almadina School

Almadina is housed in an inner city school building leased from the Calgary Public School Board. The school is well situated geographically to accommodate ESL students from the greater Calgary area (Bosetti, 2000, p. 22). The school utilizes 17 regular and special classrooms, a library, a gymnasium, a staff-administration area, and storage areas within the building. Enrollment has generally been about 300 students in grades one through nine with the current enrollment sitting at 285 students. Almadina's charter commenced in July of 1996 and extends for five years to July of 2001.

Consent and Confidentiality

Respondents were solicited with the help of the principal who gave each member of the respondent groups that I had identified an invitation to participate in this study. Written and oral descriptions of the research project outlining its (a) purpose and objectives, (b) theoretical and practical significance, (c) research methods, (d) time and commitment for participation, (e) guaranteed confidentiality, and (f) the right to withdraw from the study at any time were provided prior to the interviews. All participants were asked to sign a consent form which outlined these points, agreement to be audiotaped, and their agreement to be interviewed (see Appendix B). In the case of the student respondent group, parents of those who agreed to participate were also given a written description outlining the study in terms of its purpose and methods of study and written consent on their part was secured. Due to potential English proficiency limitations, the parents were also contacted by telephone, by the principal on my behalf, to ensure that the consent form had been understood prior to consent being granted. All participants were given an opportunity to ask questions and obtain clarification regarding the study, prior to the interview. Participants were also provided with copies of interview transcripts and invited to check them for accuracy. Except in the case of the principal, who had agreed to be identified, confidentiality was ensured and all participants were provided with pseudonyms.

PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted in early February of 2000 in order to test the interview guide, refine my interviewing technique and hone my coding skills when analyzing data. In addition, it was hoped that information gathered would complement the data to be gathered as a result of interviews with the principal, staff, students and members of the Almadina School Board.

The pilot involved conducting an interview in the home of the current superintendent of the Almadina Charter School. Using a semi-structured approach, this experience allowed me to test the questions from my interview guide to determine whether they elicited the responses I needed for my research. It also allowed me to identify questions that might have been ambiguous or potentially threatening to respondents and was beneficial in terms of determining how best to establish a rapport with interviewees.

The data analysis component of the pilot study was particularly beneficial. It allowed me to improve my ability to organize collected data, deductively and inductively, into themes which emerged as a result of the interview and based on the questions posed through the use of the interview guide.

I believe however that the pilot would have proved more beneficial had I chosen an individual more directly involved in the daily operations of Almadina school. The superintendent was a source of a wealth of information but due to his limited exposure with ESL programming and given his absence from the daily operation of the school I felt that I was unable to fully refine or test the quality of my interview guide in regards to questions about innovative ESL practices and programming. Information gleaned from the superintendent has been incorporated into the main study when identified as such.

Data Collection

Once a list of participants had been decided upon, data were collected through (a) a review of relevant documentation and (b) interviews. Relevant documentation was an examination of all aspects of the Almadina school in terms of: (a) background of the school, (b) how their ESL program is structured, (c) funding, (d) curricular modifications, and (e) assessment considerations in regards to learners at the Almadina Charter School being behind their Canadian born peers in terms of language development.

Interviews were conducted through collaboration with the school principal between April 24th and April 28th, both at Almadina school and at the workplace of one of the school board members. I used a semi-structured approach which allowed me to start with a series of structured questions but also allowed me to deviate when I sensed different themes or patterns emerging from those I had originally anticipated.

Development of the interview questions and the interview guide (see Appendix C) took place over a number of months. Initially the interview questions were developed and refined through a review of the literature, discussions with colleagues and consultation with my research professor. The interview guide was further refined through an interview assignment, a pilot study, and consultation with my research advisor. Opening questions dealt with demographics and the sample population's previous experiences with ESL programming, either in Almadina, or within the traditional public or separate system. The next set of questions dealt more specifically with how Almadina is perceived as being an innovative site for delivering ESL programming and how the stakeholders perceive themselves as meeting the needs of the students enrolled there. A third set of questions dealt with the changes that Almadina has gone through in terms of their ESL programming and the direction that stakeholders perceive the school as heading towards.

Audiotaped recordings were made during the interviews which ranged from 30 to 75 minutes in length. Verbatim transcripts (see Appendix D for an example of a partial transcript) were returned to the respondents for revision. Notes were taken during and immediately after the interviews to assist in making further changes to my interview schedule and in clarifying and identifying information that I might have found to be important while analyzing the data collected.

Data Analysis

Following each interview I made notes immediately after which later assisted in identifying emerging themes and patterns. Interview data were transcribed and categorized, both inductively and deductively, into themes initially derived from the literature and from the questions in my interview guide, and later from themes which emerged from the data. Participants were provided with copies of interview transcripts and invited to check them for accuracy.

Trustworthiness

An important criterion in maximizing trustworthiness was in the selection of participants. As some, if not all of those interviewed may have had a vested interest in the results of the study, volunteers may very well have wanted the school to be seen in as positive a light as possible. This issue was addressed through consultation with the principal who gave assurance that no discussion in regards to this study took place with the participants prior to the interview and that no volunteer was coerced or encouraged to participate in the research at any time. Volunteers were also guaranteed confidentiality which may have alleviated any apprehensions that they may have felt in being as objective as possible. In addition, every effort was made to ensure that the research questions focused on the participants' perceptions of how they felt Almadina was meeting the needs of students and not how the school may be perceived by those reading the final report. This was addressed by having a colleague review and validate my choice of interview questions prior to, and again following data collection. In addition, two types of data collection, an examination of documentation and a semi-structured interview provided triangulation which hopefully avoided any mono-operational bias on my part.

Due to the nature of this study and the uniqueness of both the Almadina Charter School and the participants involved, it is recognized that the findings of the study cannot be generalized over other situations. It is hoped however that patterns emerging within their stories will produce some transferable links to other ESL students and ESL programs offered outside of this charter school. To enhance transferability, I tried to ensure that the perceptions of the principal, staff, students, and the board members of the Almadina Charter School are presented as accurately and clearly as possible. Where possible I have written in a style which as Adler and Adler (1994) recommend, "draws the reader so closely into the subjects' worlds that these can be palpably felt" (p. 381).

Steps to enhance the dependability of this study were also taken by (a) developing an acceptable interview schedule, (b) a refinement of the interview questions, and (c) maintaining an audit trail which consisted of interview audiotapes, transcripts of each interview, data reconstruction and synthesis products (Gall, Borg & Gall, 1996), and notes taken during and after each interview.

Limitations

Researcher expectancies and the reliability of the researcher as research instrument posed potential threats in this study as there is a chance that I may have led the participants to answers that I wanted to both find and hear. This was addressed by having a colleague review and validate my interview guide and choice of questions prior to conducting my interviews and again after the collected data was analyzed.

It was not the intent of this study that narratives shared by respondents be generalized to other situations. It is hoped however that data collected from the participants and the themes that emerged will provide a thick description of the perceptions of the participants involved in the study so that some transferable links to other ESL students and ESL programs offered outside of this charter school can be provided

Delimitations

The study was delimited to only the principal, students, staff and school board members-many of whom are parents-of the Almadina School; not involving parents from the general population of the school does pose a delimitation, but as mentioned previously, due to English proficiency issues as well as the level of parental involvement in the school, this population would have proved very difficult to solicit volunteers from.

Summary

This chapter focused on the research design and how the qualitative research, both descriptive and interpretive, was conducted. A description of the respondent groups was given and an overview of the pilot study was described. Data were collected through semi- structured interviews and a review of relevant documentation and both were examined using thematic analysis. Potential errors to trustworthiness were identified as were limitations and delimitations in this study. Findings which emerged from data gathered from the respondents are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents an initial analysis of the data obtained through the interviews. The report commences with a brief outline of the research problem, the sub-problems, and the method. A description of the findings from each group of interviewees are then presented followed by a summary at the end of the section.

Research Problem

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and school board members--many of whom are also parents in the school--in regards to how they feel the Almadina Charter School meets the needs of the students enrolled there. More specifically, the purpose was to investigate reasons why Almadina is considered an innovative site for offering ESL programming and the reasons why families opt to have their children attend this school rather than attend "traditional" public or separate schools which may be closer to their homes. This was achieved by addressing the broad question: "What are the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and school board members in regards to how they feel the Almadina Charter School meets the needs of the students enrolled there?" From the general research problem, four more specific questions were also meant to be addressed:

1. What are the needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) students?
2. What do each of the interest groups at Almadina perceive themselves to be doing to meet the pupil's needs?
3. How are these actions different from what is being done at other schools?
4. How is the Almadina Charter school an innovative site for providing ESL programming?

Method

This qualitative research took the form of a case study based on semi-structured interviews to determine the perceptions of the participants from the Almadina Charter School. My findings on this phenomenon were derived using a combination of reflective and analytic reporting styles in order to identify themes or patterns which emerged as a result of my research. An examination of all documentation related to the Almadina Charter school was also conducted prior to, and following the research process.

For the purpose of this study twelve individuals were interviewed: the principal, four staff members of which two were full time ESL instructors, five students with varying levels of English proficiency and, two board members, both of whom have or have had children attending the Almadina Charter school.

Description of Findings

Principals' Profile

Joanna Douglas began serving as principal of the Almadina Charter School in September of the 1999-2000 school year. She came to Almadina with five years experience as an administrator in British Columbia and the U.S. and twelve years of ESL teaching experience including two years spent in Japan. Ms. Douglas possesses both a Bachelors degree and a Masters degree in Education. She has agreed to allow herself to be identified for the purpose of this study.

For the purpose of this chapter, an analysis of the interview with Ms. Douglas provided information which was categorized both inductively and deductively based on the questions posed in the interview guide. These categories were: (a) Almadina as a unique site for providing innovative programming, (b) staffing and resources of Almadina in meeting the needs of the students enrolled there, (c) reasons why parents choose Almadina over traditional public or separate schools, (d) cultural diversity at Almadina and, (e) changes that have occurred at Almadina over the past year. A discussion of the aforementioned points follows.

Almadina as an Innovative Site

As noted by Bosetti (1998), charter schools in Alberta are to be "sites of innovation that would complement the educational services provided by the local system" (p. 65).

Ms. Douglas, in commenting on this, first noted that, unlike traditional public or separate schools, "fifty percent of our students are ESL" and given this "we're able to use our resources accordingly". She added that serving this specialized population gives Almadina an advantage over other public schools: "We have the means to provide full time, qualified ESL instructors and are also able to tailor a program that focuses on language development" which allows Almadina to "adequately, if not very well, meet the needs of the newcomer to Canada that speaks zero English and someone who is gifted and talented."

The language programming offered at Almadina was also cited as making this school a unique site:

> The language arts classes are all scheduled at the same time and we have all hands on deck at that time. Teaching assistants are teaching language blocks along with the librarian and so forth....., so that you have a lower ratio, ten to one and there's a school wide planning of themes, throughout all the lit blocks.

This she claimed differs from the programming offered at traditional public or separate schools in that, "you can see that it would be difficult if you only had a couple of ESL students within a class" a comment she supported by noting "the word from them [Alberta Learning] is indeed you are providing a program that is not easily presented in a public school."

Ms. Douglas also mentioned that Almadina is unique in the innovative assessment practices that are currently being implemented in order to individualize instruction:

> In September we did a lot of baseline testing in the language area and put together language portfolios on each and every student here, whether they are a newcomer to Canada or someone who was born and raised here and speaks great English.

Ms. Douglas did note that this is the first year that such a practice has been implemented but felt that now, "this information is well known by all of the home room teachers and the support teachers" and "I think we have a real clear picture of who we've got in our classrooms for the first time." Ms. Douglas also added that, by having "the fine data" on the students, the staff at Almadina were better able to place the students in the appropriate literacy blocks (as outlined in Appendix E). For example, she noted that a student coming to Almadina with zero English at the Division one or Division two level (grades one through six) would be placed in "a literacy block every day for eighty-five minutes." At the Division three level (grades seven through nine), Ms. Douglas stated that a student would have "two, one hour blocks, four times a week." In terms of Almadina being an innovative site, Ms. Douglas observed, "once again it's considerably more time spent then they would in a traditional public school in language arts."

In respect to whether Ms. Douglas felt that, as an innovative site, Almadina was better preparing students to enter into "mainstream schooling" she stated that she has just started a tracking process so that "we're ready to not say, well...I think we are." She did add that in the past, she has seen ESL students go into their local public or separate schools where they were "immediately streamed into non academic classes because of their language." She stated, as a result: "I've had some brilliant ESL students, who are placed in math 14 because they don't speak English and yet they're working at a math level of second year university." In this respect, Ms. Douglas felt, "I think that our students needs are being better met and in the end they will be more successful when they leave."

Staffing and Resources

In terms of meeting the needs of the students, staffing has been a key stumbling block in the success of the school. There have been a total of six principals since the school had its charter enacted in 1996 and there has been a consistent turnover of teaching staff after each year of operation. As stated by Ms. Douglas, "you can imagine what a beating the morale took in past years, where teachers were unsure if they're doing the right thing and not feeling supported and confused." In regards to the current staff at Almadina, Ms. Douglas remarked that, unlike in past years, "I think now the teachers feel good and there's actually a vision for the school and something that they themselves can take pride in building and improving." She augmented this statement by adding that this "has shown in the lack of staff overturn that we're going to have this year when we go into next year."

In terms of how the principal felt that current staffing levels were in regards to meeting the needs of the students, Ms. Douglas commented that "you always want more but right now I've got three very qualified ESL instructors for Division one, Division two, and Division three." She noted that, like any other school board, Almadina's funding is what it is and you do the best you can, but she mentioned in terms of next year: "I think we can continue to provide a superlative, language focused program here at the school." As she pointed out, "class sizes are no different than you would find at a traditional public school." Ms. Douglas did state however that "where our class size differs from the traditional public school, is in our language arts instruction and in our Heritage Language instruction." The language arts classes, as Ms. Douglas described them "all average out to be at about eleven or twelve students to one" and the Heritage Language classes (which are conducted in Arabic and French) also "are at about ten to one, maybe eight to one." On this Ms. Douglas noted, "for a teacher, and I do my own literacy block as well, I think it is great."

The dedication that the staff has shown this year in improving the ESL program and in meeting the needs of the students enrolled at Almadina was further commented on by Ms. Douglas:

> I've got a very dedicated staff here...We have meetings four nights a week. Monday we have our SRG (Student Resource Group), Tuesday is our staff meeting, Wednesday is our literacy block meetings where they do their collaborative planning with their themes and what their doing in the classes. And then Thursdays we have IPP (Individual Program Plan) meetings or ESL meetings and so forth.

Ms. Douglas again reiterated that, because this has been such a transition year for Almadina, "there has to be even more collaborative teamwork because we've had to overcome so many other things, other than simply a very intense ESL focus that the school has."

Appropriate resources are essential in operating an ESL program such as the one offered at Almadina. Again Ms. Douglas felt that the resources available now have improved greatly over what was available in the past. She stated, "our library has basically been created this year" and added that this in itself has contributed to staff satisfaction because "in the past it hasn't been so. We've had to seek out materials that are suitable for students such as ours." She now felt that, "if you look at our budget you could see we have spent a considerable amount of money getting materials that meet the curricular goals and are suitable for our students." Overall, Ms. Douglas commented, in regards to the resources available: "Do we have everything we need? No. Will we ever? No. But we're certainly closer and I think that's another reason why teachers feel more comfortable staying because they have the tools that they need to do the job."

Parental Choice

One question which I had hoped would be answered as a result of the research was, "why do parents opt to have their children go to Almadina as opposed to traditional public or separate schools?" In addressing my query, Ms. Douglas stated that, when Almadina first opened its doors in 1996, it was more for cultural than academic reasons. She noted:

> I think that the students who came here were looking for a comfortable place. The majority of our students are from the Middle East and I think that the parents felt comfortable that there were students from other countries from the Middle East who understood their culture, who understood their religion, their values and so forth.

She added that because Almadina offers a Heritage Language Program where students are given the opportunity to read, write, listen, and speak in Arabic, parents also send their children to this school because "they [the parents] want their children to continue to have a connection with their background and their parents former country of residence."

She did remark however that the perception of Almadina as an Arabic School appears to be changing and that more parents are beginning to send their children here for the ESL programming offered. She commented: "We've refocused our energies on ESL and I find as I go through the registration process for next year we are getting more parents that call for the reasons of the Charter, that this is an ESL school." She augmented this statement by adding: "I think with the clearer definition of what this school is all about, we are attracting the kinds of students that are the best fit for the school."

Given the aforementioned points, Ms. Douglas felt that parents are currently sending their students to Almadina for two reasons. She stated:

> There's two distinct groups I think. There are the parents whose students come here because they want the ESL instruction and they know we are doing our best to provide a cutting edge program. Then there is the other group who want their children to carry on studying their first language, Arabic.

When asked about her thoughts on an ESL school serving predominantly one distinct culture a whole new theme emerged, that of cultural diversity.

Cultural Diversity at Almadina

The Almadina Charter School's mandate as cited in the document, *A School Growth Process for Almadina Charter School* (1999), stated that:

> The Almadina Charter School was founded to fulfill the educational needs for descendants of first generation Canadian families and new immigrants in the city of Calgary (p. 14).

Although the current population of Almadina can be identified as meeting this description, the school has been perceived as being a Muslim or Arabic school, not an ESL school, given the majority of the students enrolled there are from the Arabic community. Ms. Douglas expressed these thoughts regarding the lack of cultural diversity at Almadina:

> It depends on what day you ask me on. When I first came to this school, and was interviewed, I was espousing yes, as soon as we can get our house straightened out let's try and spread our wings and invite students from other cultures to our school. Then I started to realize some of the value added to

> having a group of students from a similar background. And so some days I say this is good because the students have a mutual understanding and can help each other out with becoming more familiar with Canadian culture and interpreting Canadian culture. But then I have my days when I'm back to my multicultural model.

When asked to expand on serving one distinct population, Ms. Douglas indicated that the students benefit in that "you can apply the understanding that you have of that one country's culture and beliefs and you can choose appropriate material that would be interesting to them because of their background." In addition Ms. Douglas acknowledged: "If you're a teacher in a class of twenty-four students from twenty-four different countries, it's hard to become knowledgeable about all the different cultures and what their strengths and weaknesses and their special needs will be."

And the drawbacks of serving one cultural group? Ms. Douglas shared the following comment that, "as a teacher, teaching a class that has children from many different countries is good because all of a sudden there is a real need for the students to speak English." She also made mention that students at Almadina would benefit from being "exposed to a wider cross section of people than people that are just very familiar with their own culture or background" but acknowledged that this would "put further demand on our ESL program because ESL and language is just one component of the larger picture culture."

In regards to serving one distinct culture and the socialization of the students, Ms. Douglas made reference to recent problems between students from different cultural groups at some of the local high schools. She remarked: "I have to start working with these kids at an earlier age to have a better understanding, a better appreciation of people from other cultures, other than their own cultural background."

As part of the mandate, it is expected that Almadina will meet the needs of all ESL students who are descendants of first generation Canadian families and new immigrants. Ms. Douglas expressed these thoughts:

> The original intent of this charter school was to have a diverse population. So that is our Charter, and I've seen it work in other schools where I've been at. I think that's where we will go but we're still in a situation where I'm not about to start recruiting within other Ethnic communities until I'm confident that we have ironed out a lot of the wrinkles that cropped up in the first couple of years.

Overall, it appears that for the time being, Almadina will continue serving a predominantly Arabic population but as Ms. Douglas illustrated, "we're starting to get a wider number of ethnic groups interested at the lower levels and we've had a number of recent Asian immigrants who have applied for next year, in the elementary levels, grades one and two." She summarized by stating, " I think it will start and when I feel confident that we're ready, that's when I will start to really seek out other groups to come to our school."

Almadina in Transition

In April of 1999 a consultant team of four members, led by Dr. Russ Wiebe was asked by the Superintendent of the Almadina Charter school to compile a growth report in answer to growing concerns that the school was not meeting the educational needs of its students and the provisions of its Charter. The final report was submitted on June 8th, 1999 from which a growth plan was developed and a number of recommendations made. Ms. Douglas offered her perceptions about the situation at Almadina when she took over the administrative duties in September of 1999: "It was basically a survival situation and last year it was evident that ESL was no longer a focus, and that was against why this Charter School was ever created." She further commented that a clear message had been sent by the Ministry of Education as well that, "you were given your charter for this reason [ESL] and it's time you get back to that place."

Ms. Douglas cited Russ Wiebe's consulting organization and the recommendation's made in their Growth Report (1999) as being the catalyst in helping Almadina get back on track. She remarked in reference to the recommendations:

> I think some of those measures were critical in turning the school around and this year we have had a strict adherence to the recommendations made in the growth report, i.e. discipline, student pride, class organization, the physical location of the school and how the school is set up.

Ms. Douglas added, in referring to the ESL program offered at Almadina: "I think when those basic concerns were met [the recommendations], than it became possible to re-focus and create the type of unique ESL program that the school had wanted to present initially."

In response to how Alberta Learning has thus far monitored and viewed the changes that have taken place over the last year, Ms. Douglas noted, "Alberta learning has come in twice...and I think they felt quite comfortable that a change has happened for the better and that the focus of the school was back on the ESL language instruction."

Ms. Douglas also felt that progress has been made over past years in terms of how the needs of the individual students are being addressed. She commented that, "even in September when I first arrived on the scene, people could say we have 283 students here and we've got some ESL students but no one really had an idea [regarding the ESL population of the school]." She added that now "every student has a language portfolio and the information is well known by all the support teachers, whether they're ESL or math teaching assistants and so forth."

Ms. Douglas identified another area of growth seen over the year as being an increase in student awareness regarding Almadina as an ESL school. She explained: "Because it is more clearly defined now, the students can't help but realize, the idea of the school is about language and language across the curriculum." She claimed this awareness has also substantially decreased the issue of discipline, which had been an area of ongoing concern at Almadina. She stated:

> Discipline was a real concern here because I think there were a number of different groups that said no, Almadina is this. No, Almadina is that. And at the parent level or the board level I think there was disagreement as to what the school was all about and it filtered down to the children and affected their behavior.

Ms. Douglas further commented that now: "I think there is a better understanding on everyone's part, at every level - board, parents, teachers, and students of what the school's all about and I think that has improved the way the students behave here."

The issue of student pride and the physical state of the building was another aspect of Almadina identified in the growth report by Watt et al. Upon reflection, Ms. Douglas offered these thoughts: "I think now student pride is starting to show and they take pride in the building." She added:

> people tell me how it was last year and when I came in September it seemed like after every recess and lunch there was all sorts of garbage out there. But now kids are picking up their own garbage. There is more pride now in the physical location and more pride in the fact that they're here, and we see people inviting their friends and relatives to enroll in the school because it is a place where they feel comfortable or confident for their children to attend.

Ms. Douglas acknowledged that, despite all the changes that have occurred over the course of the past year, there is still work to be done. She stated, "I'm sure as you walk through the school, you realize that we are not at Nirvana yet. We still have our work cut out for us but as with any school the process takes time."

Summary

In regards to how well Almadina is meeting the needs of the students enrolled there, the perception of the principal is that the school has experienced it's share of "growing pains" since its inception in 1996. She commented: I think, as you might imagine, the whole process of starting a school, from scratch basically, is a difficult process." However, it is also her perception that, in the past year, a lot has been done to ensure they are refocused on their mandate of offering innovative ESL programming and in meeting the needs of the individuals attending this school. As she noted about Almadina, and Charter schools in general: "Yes, we have an ESL focus, but anyone who wants to come here can come here." Thus her vision for the future of Almadina is: "Coming closer to meeting the needs of more and more different types of students that are at our school."

Staff Profile

The four teachers who volunteered for this study are all current staff members of the Almadina Charter School and all have been employed at Almadina since at least the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year. Two of the teachers are full time ESL instructors. Of the remaining two teachers, one is an elementary, Division one teacher while the other teaches at the junior high level. Teaching experience ranges from two to eighteen years and all possess a minimum of a Bachelor Degree in Education.

Pseudonyms for each of the staff members were assigned. They will, for the purpose of this study be referred to as Pat, Jamie, Chris and Sandy

For the purpose of this chapter, an analysis of the interview with the staff members yielded information which was categorized both inductively and deductively based on the questions posed in the interview guide. These categories were: (a) Almadina as a unique site for providing innovative programming, (b) staffing and resources of Almadina in meeting the needs of the students enrolled there, (c) reasons why parents choose Almadina over traditional public or separate schools, (d) cultural diversity at Almadina and, (e) changes that have occurred at Almadina over the past year. A discussion of the aforementioned points follows.

Almadina as an Innovative Site

Bosetti, Foulkes, O'Reilly and Sande (2000) stated, in describing Charter schools as innovative sites, "while the programs developed and strategies employed in these schools are not original, what distinguishes them as innovative is that they are applied across the whole school and serve to define the mandate and philosophy of the charter school" (p. 1). They further added, "This has the effect of creating a strong commitment on the part of the teachers and parents to a clearly articulated approach to teaching and learning" (p. 1).

The staff members interviewed all commented that one of the primary reasons Almadina could be considered an innovative site for ESL programming was in the literacy block approach (refer to Appendix E) that Almadina adopted at the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year. Sandy's remark summed up their beliefs: "We're trying to group students so that it is more homogenous, within age groups. So the weaker students, within age linguistically, are with other weaker students, the strong students are with the stronger students." They also commented that unlike traditional public or separate schools the literacy block approach allowed for a much lower student/teacher ratio in offering an ESL based language arts program. Jamie noted: "We've got more staff and that's helped to reduce the numbers in lit block. The ratio number is like twelve to one, which is unbelievable, you can't get that in a regular school." A thematic approach to the language arts program was another area participants felt was unique in that "our literature blocks are organized by theme so we are all teaching a common knowledge." In accomplishing this Jamie stated, "we have weekly lit block meetings where we get together and talk about upcoming themes and what kind of activities we should be doing in our classroom" and "on PD (professional development) days it's all dedicated to literacy block and assessing literacy block."

Participants also felt that Almadina was unique in the approach the school takes in assessing the needs of the individuals enrolled there. Sandy offered:

> They are given quite a battery of tests in September that look at their reading comprehension, their language abilities, their ability to visually process language and take notes, their overall competency and their vocabulary. All those things are being done to objectively assess where the students are at, which other schools don't do.

Chris mentioned the SRG meetings, held every Monday by staff members as also contributing to meeting the needs of the individual students: "The meetings are usually about two and a half hours long and we just discuss students. We go through a list of all the kids and we basically see how each one is doing and what we can do for them. It's very time consuming, but well worth it."

Participants expressed uncertainty about the extent to which Almadina students were prepared to enter "mainstream" schooling, although all felt that they received a strong foundation as a result of the programming offered at the school. One participant, when comparing the program at Almadina with other ESL programs experienced felt, "obviously the kids here are getting a much better foundation. Much, much better." Sandy commented, "the support they're getting here will help them have a better chance of success to get through grade ten, eleven and twelve. They can finish their high school and possibly go on to finish college or university." Sandy added however, that: "They [the parents] need to know that they are not getting the curriculum that they'll be getting at so and so junior high school down the street."

Two of the participants commented that, "I know if they went into a public school it is sink or swim" and "I think of how they would be in a regular public school, I think they would be lost." Chris did mention however that, because in many cases the program is "watered down" to meet the needs of the class as a whole, the higher end students "are not necessarily getting what they need because I'm not making it difficult enough for them." Chris supported this comment by stating: "I don't know if I've prepared them enough because I think they should be doing much more. But I think......I hope so!"

Participants also cited the population that Almadina serves itself makes it a unique site for providing innovative programming. Jamie stated: "Almost one third of our students are coded for ESL. I don't think any other school in this district or in Alberta has that high a coding of ESL students." Chris noted "I think they feel very comfortable here.... they don't discriminate against each other which is nice because I think maybe some of them would feel uncomfortable in other schools." Pat felt that, due to the focus of the school being ESL, the population was "much less transient," the result being a plus "because you have your group of students and you don't have them coming in at mid stream and having to start from scratch." All participants acknowledged that while the innovative programming being offered at Almadina was greatly improved, whether through personal experience or through word of mouth, over what had been offered in previous years, it was still "work in progress" and that there was still further refinement needed in order to offer an "ideal ESL program."

Staffing and Resources

All respondents gave credit to their current colleagues for the dedication and hard work they had demonstrated over the past year(s). Two of the four participants felt that the time commitment of the staff was over and above what "you'd find in a public school" and Pat mentioned that, "they're a very committed staff. Not afraid of hard work and very supportive of each other."

In response to how adequate the staffing at Almadina was perceived to be in terms of meeting the needs of the students enrolled there, participant responses were mixed. All cited the student/teacher ratios in the literacy blocks to be anywhere from "adequate" to "incredible." Most felt however that the regular class sizes were simply too large, given the nature of the population enrolled there. Sandy commented: "We need more bodies so that we can lower the teacher pupil ratio [in the regular classrooms], because right now we still have twenty five, thirty kids in a class and that kind of negates the value of us streaming." These sentiments were echoed by Chris who felt, "it's too much and I don't know how they [the Almadina School Board] can expect it. I think we either need to make the class sizes smaller or we need more teachers". Pat also noted that "some of the classes are large" but added, "I'm not so sure that it's different from a lot of other schools."

All teachers expressed a desire to have more teacher aides in the regular classes. Sandy believed:

> We have found that our student population is about the same as last year, almost three hundred, but we've found that we don't have near as many

> teacher aides as we had last year...It would be great if we had those bodies, we've lost those bodies.

Pat also reported that, when hired: "I understood there would be an aide for each division. Well that didn't happen-we share one aide. I think we could use a few more aides for specific purposes." Chris felt that the lack of aide support has led to frustration in regards to meeting the needs of the students and commented, "I feel guilty because I know there are still kids who aren't getting their special needs dealt with or they're not getting helped."

Two of the respondents also raised the issue that due to its unique population, there was a need at Almadina to provide counseling for some of the students enrolled there. Sandy shared the following insights:

> The fact that a lot of our kids have such traumatic backgrounds, I think what we need, well what all the schools in this city need, are more counselors, who in this case speak Arabic. These students need psychological counseling - for trauma, for time in refugee camps, for seeing relatives hurt or killed in wars. We could do more to help those students, not only because they've got special needs, but also because the socialization aspects, the aggression.

In respect to the adequacy of resources available to the staff, responses among participants varied. On the one hand Pat felt that the new library was very well equipped and that in accessing new material: "I'm very impressed. It's much easier to get things here than anywhere else I have experienced." Jamie on the other hand expressed a desire for "more hands on stuff" and a wish that "there was more of a budget for us to order things." Sandy commented that the library has been getting a lot of good teaching material and that good resources take several years to build up. Sandy did illustrate however that the new material was not always ESL based and was candid in stating: "You need the visual aids, you need the easy readers and the literacy materials which don't patronize the kids. You can't be reading fuzzy bunnies in grade seven."

Due to the population of Almadina being predominantly Arabic, Jamie felt that there was a need for more bilingual resources: "If we had more bilingual dictionaries...Or even basal readers in Arabic, I think that would help the kids." All respondents acknowledged the fact that the resources available to them now were infinitely better than when each of them had started. Jamie went as far as stating, "oh I can just say that the percentage of improvement [available resources] has been amazing."

Parental Choice

When asked to address the question, "why do parents opt to have their children go to Almadina as opposed to traditional public or separate schools?", participant response was almost unanimous in claiming, "for cultural reasons." Two of the staff members interviewed actually went so far as to say, "I don't think a lot of parents even realize that it's an ESL school." Although religion is not a formal part of the curriculum at Almadina, it was one reason cited by Jamie as to why parents may opt to send their children to Almadina: "We don't force children to pray but I think a lot [of parents] just think, oh they pray on Friday. Therefore I think the main reason [they have their children attend Almadina] is they have Islamic prayers here."

Chris felt that a lot of parents may be sending their daughters to Almadina because "it's more conservative and the parents are very conservative. There's no high school dances here, that would be unacceptable." Chris augmented this statement by adding: "I think the teachers here are also very aware of their [Arabic] culture so there's a lot of things we don't necessarily go into that they might in other places."

Arabic language instruction was another reason cited regarding Almadina as a parent's school of choice. Jamie noted that while some school districts offer Heritage Language programs there was none to be offered in this district and that, "the parents themselves know that if they send their child to a school within their area, they won't get exposure to literacy within their own first language." This comment was supported by Chris who mentioned: "Some parents also realize they've got their

Heritage Language program here and of course they want their kids to learn Arabic. Some [parents] I think really do feel their kids need it."

Bosetti et al. (2000) noted that "it was expected that Alberta charter schools would replicate the breadth of parental involvement seen in many charter schools in other jurisdictions" (p. 3). According to some of the respondents, this has not been the case at Almadina. Pat liked the idea of being able to reach out to parents but, although that potential exists at Almadina it is an area that "maybe needs to be tapped a little more." Pat further added:

> Talking to the kids about parent teacher interviews, I emphasize to them that you need to bring your mom and dad. Well my mom's working and....I can see lots of excuses, I mean we all have to work, but I think there could be a lot more parental involvement.

Chris also noted that the parents don't get involved but added: "They're [the parents] supportive. If you have a problem or your students aren't doing anything in class, we'll talk to them...they listen and they're willing to help you. They'll do what they have to at home. But they don't get involved."

Jamie expressed an opinion that there still were parents sending their students here for the reasons in which Almadina was founded in first place; that there was a concern among the Arabic community about high drop out rates amongst their youths. When asked to expand on these thoughts, Jamie offered:

> Parents are worried that their kids are not going to do well...Everybody, like all immigrants that have come to Canada over the years have better hopes for their children. And then if you don't see the one system that you sort of trust to help your child, go beyond where your at and living up to what you expect, than I think this has led to a lot of concerns [among parents] with the regular public system.

Two of the respondents added that while many parents continue to send their students to Almadina for cultural reasons and the Heritage Language program offered, the perception that it is an "Arabic school" is beginning to change. Chris stated: "I think a lot of the parents are now informed of what this school is all about because I don't think they knew", while Jamie added that the literacy blocks offered this year, "has been a big selling point for us."

Cultural Diversity

Wiebe et al. (1999) identified that, "most of the students who attended Almadina Charter School were from Arabic speaking families with predominant cultural ties to the country of Lebanon" (p. 8). When asked to comment on the fact that many perceive this school to be either an Arabic school or as a Muslim Heritage school-not as an ESL school, Jamie shared the following thoughts: "I think in the beginning it was a good thing because it was that group [the Arabic community] that got themselves together. It was the Arabic community which was the most worried and were able to get something going, a proposal done." It was noted by more than one participant however that, although the founders of Almadina had the best of intentions: "The school started too quickly. There wasn't enough foundation built for this school to even start building structure." Sandy described a reaction to the school when coming to drop off applications: "I didn't see too many colors of the rainbow. I saw one color of that rainbow but not too much of the other. It has to diversify, but how, where and when is the best way, I don't know."

Both positive and negative aspects of serving one predominant cultural group were identified by the respondents. Most felt that, by serving one distinct population, they were better able to meet their needs in terms of peer assistance, resources, and planning for instruction. Pat emphasized:

> I have had experience in working with kids from a number of different countries and it was fairly common that there would be a child that nobody in the school could talk to. So different from here where there's lots of people available to translate.

Jamie added it has given her the opportunity to refine her ESL program and felt, "from the predominance you're able to see how important socialization within the family is, in terms of specific groups."

Socialization was the aspect most oft cited as being detrimental to serving one predominant population. More than one participant expressed concern that, in the past, students have been "pushed out" because they weren't Muslim. Sandy emphatically stated: "Tolerance [among cultures] and acceptance needs to be addressed here much more and I don't think you can address it so much when it's predominantly one cultural group; that just engenders the horde mentality." Pat echoed this sentiment: "Because they're so culturally bound to their own culture they don't have the same opportunities that other ESL students have, to practice English outside of their own group."

All participants believed that Almadina needed to begin serving a more diverse population if they are to meet the needs of the students as effectively as possible. Jamie expressed a desire to have more native English speaking students integrated into the school: "I feel that they'd [the students] do better if they had children whose first language was English so all the other parts of the English culture, Canadian culture, and the values that they have could be shared." Sandy also felt that, in order for the students of Almadina to learn more about the value and uniqueness of others, Almadina needed to become more diversified:

> Right now it's almost like a bit of a ghetto or a microcosm and it's not helping these students learn tolerance, patience, or a respect for other cultures. These students then go off to grade ten, eleven, or twelve, and they end up just basically joining other kids of the same heritage background and causing problems in high school.

More than one respondent inferred that, "if I was of a different cultural background, I don't know how comfortable I would be sending my son or daughter here."

Almost all participants mentioned that Almadina is currently making efforts in addressing the diversity issue and commented that "this year they're [the board and the administration] going to do a brochure which advertises Almadina to a broader population base." Jamie pointed out that: "The board has acknowledged that it is their next goal once the school is more stable. They don't want to invite people in when there is chaos in here." Jamie further stated that addressing the issue of diversity, unlike in the past, "is being mentioned a lot now."

Almadina in Transition

All respondents recognized that Almadina has gone through some very positive changes since they began working at Almadina due primarily to the Growth Report submitted by Watt et al in June of 1999, some key administrative changes at the beginning of the 1999-2000 school year and, the assistance of Hetty Roessingh, an ESL instructor at Queen Elizabeth High School and sessional professor at the University of Calgary.

When expressing thoughts about Almadina prior to this school year one respondent reflected that, when hired: "I didn't know anything about charter schools. I had no idea what I was entering into. I didn't even know it was an ESL school!" Jamie added: When I started there was no clear hierarchy, there wasn't a clear definition of people's roles. This led to a lot of struggles." This, Jamie noted has changed: "Finally it seems like things have calmed down this year. The board recognizes it's roles and has defined limits as does everybody else."

Lack of an effective discipline policy was an area most respondents felt had inhibited Almadina'a ability to deliver effective programming in the past. "When I first arrived here", one participant noted, "it [discipline] was really bad. But we've become more consistent and established a discipline policy. It has gotten much better." Sandy also commented:

> I think one of the big initial changes has been a more concerted, coordinated effort to maintain a certain standard of discipline here at the school. It waxes and wanes as far as teacher willpower to enforce it but it's more consistent than it was last year.

The ESL program itself, and the addition of literacy blocks in addressing the language needs of the population enrolled there was gleaned from participants as a much needed area of change over past practice. Chris believed: "I think now the staff is constantly thinking in the back of their minds that this is the way to do it in regards to themes across the curriculum." Sandy also commented that, "of course the big change this year was trying to streamline students according to their language abilities into literacy blocks," a process Sandy described as "having some successes and some unexpected results." Pat felt that this streaming has allowed staff to get the ESL aspect of their teaching under control and that currently: "Everyone knows where they're going and what they're doing, modifying curriculum to meet more kids."

Morale among Almadina's staff members was also cited by most respondents as having improved over last year. Pat noted that teachers, "are starting to feel their efforts are being recognized. Before you felt like you were fighting a losing battle whereas it's not a losing battle anymore." Jamie mentioned staff turnover appeared to be very low for the 2000-2001 school year and indicated "most people are really interested in coming back next year and have mostly positive things to say about the school. Those are all big time positives."

Respondents differed somewhat in how they perceived their relationship with the Almadina school board as having changed this year. Jamie believed: "The board has been very supportive this year and it has helped to make it a better place than it was in previous years." Sandy on the other hand offered:

> The board has it's own agenda...I think they are very much in competition with past boards and with a particular private school in this city. So their agenda is to say at the end of the year, see we were the best board and we got the best results.

Site-based governance should allow for greater interaction between the staff and board members. In regards to this occurring at Almadina, Sandy was candid: "I've rarely seen school board members in this school, to see what's going on, on a daily basis. You've only got one school for goodness sake, not a whole school division."

Jamie however perceived otherwise: "This year there is a lot more staff to board interaction. We've had a dinner with them and we've had meetings with them. In a regular system, you don't ever see your board."

Summary

All respondents appeared to perceive Almadina as heading in the right direction in regards to meeting the needs of its students and the provisions as set out in its Charter. They cited a much more consistent administration, a sound discipline policy, and a revamped ESL program where students are streamed into literacy blocks as being the key areas of improvement over last year. Participants still appeared to feel that the school needed to diversify it's current population more and reduce regular class sizes if they were to offer the "ideal" ESL programming that would best meet the needs of the individual students enrolled at Almadina.

All respondents expressed deep frustration with having to serve an ESL population while at the same time meeting expectations to increase provincial achievement exam scores. Sandy summarized their beliefs:

> I think the school should realize that the achievement exams are for born, bred, and raised in Canada kinds of students...That's not our clients and so we shouldn't be worrying about the achievement exams so much because they don't even begin to measure what our students do know in their first language or their own culture.

Chris echoed this sentiment: "I don't know how giving we are in Alberta to these kids because I think I'm going much slower, and this [focus on] achievement testing is lingering all the time." Jamie stated the board needs to be more cognizant of the population Almadina is serving: "They [the board] still don't recognize or acknowledge that the marks are not as important as the progress. Their progress over time, not the progress on one day, one month, one year, in one grade."

What the future for Almadina held, participants varied in their beliefs but consensus was, in the words of Chris: "It's come so far. If you think how far it has come, it could do amazing things."

Student Profile

The five students who volunteered for this study are all junior high school students, grades seven through nine, and all have attended Almadina for at least three school years. Three of the five participants had attended various other public schools prior to enrolling at Almadina while the other two students went directly to this school after immigrating to Canada. From the student respondent group I asked for volunteers from only Division Three as it was hoped that they would provide a richer description of their experiences in regards to the ESL and "regular" academic programming offered at Almadina.

Three of the students were proficient in speaking English and were not receiving any specialized ESL programming at present, while two of the students were still receiving individualized ESL instruction. Information gleaned from the two participants receiving ESL instruction was considered superficial due to their English proficiency level and was used, for the purpose of this study, primarily to complement and support statements made by the other three respondents.

Pseudonyms for each of the students were assigned in order to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. They will, for the purpose of this study be referred to as Tom, Sally, Betty, Bill and Sue.

For the purpose of this chapter, an analysis of the interview with the students yielded information which was categorized both inductively and deductively based on the questions posed in the interview guide. These categories were: (a) Almadina as a unique site for providing innovative programming, (b) staffing and resources of Almadina in meeting the needs of the students enrolled there, (c) reasons why parents choose Almadina over traditional public or separate schools, (d) cultural diversity at Almadina and, (e) changes that have occurred at Almadina over the past year. A discussion of the aforementioned points follows.

Almadina as an Innovative Site

Bosetti et al. (2000), in reporting on charter schools as innovative sites stated, "about half are serving a particular population or need, while others employ a particular methodology, curricular focus or philosophy" (p. 1). Almadina, in meeting the needs of the students enrolled there, claims to be doing both; serving the ESL population of the school through a structured ESL program with a strong language across the curriculum focus while also offering regular academic programming and a Heritage Language program to support the development of English language proficiency.

Most student respondents felt there was little difference in the programming offered at Almadina to that offered in traditional public or separate schools. Tom commented: "If you come here and you're an ESL student they take you to an ESL class. But if you're not then they teach you what they would teach you in a normal school."

All participants did credit Almadina with an innovative language arts program where students are placed into literacy blocks according to their level of English proficiency. Sally observed: "Based on your level of language arts you're now placed with kids in a similar group because it's hard when there's kids at a higher level but they have to be set back because there is others who need help." She felt that this system is "really doing pretty good" and remarked: "I remember seeing kids that thought that reading was boring and sucked. Now you see them bringing chapter books home from school and reading and saying, this is so cool."

All respondents perceived the individualized attention they receive at Almadina as being different from other public schools that they have heard about or attended. Tom shared these thoughts: "Kids that used to go here and went to public schools tell me there was way more help here." Sally felt that the public school which she attended, "was really good and everything but the teachers never really spent their time to stay with you after school like here." Sue echoed these sentiments and stated unlike the public school she attended: "Here the teachers phone us. They give us so many chances and they really care about us."

Although three of the respondents were not receiving formal ESL instruction, all observed that the ESL students in the school were progressing rapidly. Bill noted, "some girls who arrived here just two months ago are now speaking English very well," while Sue noted, "I've noticed that a lot of the ESL girl's English is a lot better-like some of them never knew any English at all and now they know it and speak it well."

Staffing and Resources

All respondents emphatically stated that the teaching staff at Almadina were very supportive and giving of their time. Bill and Betty commented: "The teachers here are very helpful. If you are having troubles they stay after school and donate extra help for an hour. That has been very good." Sally also appreciated the support students received beyond normal instructional hours:

> If you need help after school you will get it by the teachers here. If you're not understanding the subject, the teacher will come to you and say I think you should stay after school to get a better understanding of what you're learning....They're not out to get you, they just want you to be prepared for other years and they just want your life to be easier.

Tom felt that teacher assistance has been one of the primary changes he had observed since coming to Almadina: "In the beginning they wouldn't let you stay late or they were always busy or something. Now it's like whenever you want you can stay for extra help."

Participants were also unanimous in inferring this support extended beyond academics. Sally noted, "the teachers here will have discussions with you about things that are causing trouble in society. They teach you how to be better prepared and more mature and how to attack things in a better way." Tom appreciated the fact that "they [the staff] listen to your opinions. If you want something changed or your not happy with something, they'll think about it and not just say yeah whatever."

In regards to the resources available in meeting their educational needs, most participants cited the new library as being the biggest improvement over past years. Sally believed, "it has really helped because now if you need to do research, you can come here and get help from the librarian on that research. I think every school needs a library." Tom also noted that, besides the library, "we've got new computers" and in terms of everyday resources, "the teachers provide us with most of the supplies that we need."

Comments regarding class size ranged from "pretty much good" to "just perfect" and no respondent felt that having ESL students integrated into the regular classroom slowed the pace or hindered progress in any way. Tom offered his perception: "They're just separated. Like they sit with us but they're given different work. They read something or learn something else or there's usually two teachers. One teacher tells them what to do and the other teaches us." Sally further illustrated: "It doesn't hold you back because while everybody's going through they have things to look at which are easier for them to understand. Everybody gets a good understanding of it."

Responses were mixed regarding the extracurricular activities available to the students. Sally felt that the absence of interaction between Almadina and other public schools was not a negative "because Almadina is more of a community." She explained: "We still have competitions with each other...and their intramural program is very good." Sally conceded however that, "some children don't agree. But usually when children don't like school, they'll raise negative things upon the school." Tom on the other hand felt that, "a bad thing about this school is they aren't involved with public school stuff...sports or special days."

Parental Choice

It could be assumed that, because Almadina is mandated as a charter school, the reasons why parents would want to send there children here is due to the ESL and language across the curriculum programming offered here. Student respondents reported this is not necessarily the case and they cited a variety of reasons for attending this school. Sue stated: "My parents wanted me to learn Arabic" while Sally also cited cultural reasons: "My parents have a really good understanding of what's going on and they have Friday prayers because most of the children are Muslim." She did add however that, "they [her parents] really like how the teachers spend time to talk to you and explain stuff and they always have time to talk to the parents about it." Bill stated it was because they "teach Arabic here while at the same time teach ESL" while Tom and Betty stated because "it was close to their home(s)." Most participants felt that as a whole, students attended Almadina because of the predominant culture being served there although almost all added their parents were pleased with the programming taking place and the "opportunities provided for the students."

Cultural Diversity

All respondents agreed that the student population at Almadina was predominantly Muslim but most were quick to add that students from other cultures attended this school as well. Responses varied however regarding acceptance of the non Muslim student population. Sue felt that students of diverse cultural backgrounds may not feel welcome here, "because some of the people in this school are really racist and they're so used to being surrounded by other Islamic students." Sally on the other hand believed: "It's not just Muslims here and everybody learns to get along with each other. It's not like I'm this and your that and I'm better than you." Tom echoed those sentiments: "For someone with a different religion, it really wouldn't be different because we'll [the Muslim students] treat them the same." Tom acknowledged however, "but sometimes they eat different, talk different...just think different" a comment supported by Sue who believed: "Some of the ESL students still get made fun of because of the way they dress or speak, or smell differently."

Some respondents felt they were experiencing greater academic growth due to Almadina being a predominantly Arabic population. Bill noted that by having other Arabic students present, "if the English teacher told me something and I didn't understand it, someone would explain it to me in Arabic. It is easier." Sally reinforced this perception and observed: "There is teachers here that can give the kids a better understanding because they speak their language. They can explain things to them [ESL students] and they don't make them feel left out and put pressure on them."

Participants identified a separation between the ESL/non ESL student population in addition to segregation based on cultural diversity. Sally believed: "The difference is in identity. Sometimes the ESL students might hang out with other ESL students and kids who aren't will hang out with other kids." Tom also felt: "Some of them [ESL students] hang around with us, but most of them just hang around with each other." Sue observed that the students demonstrating proficiency in English: "Are not really mean, and they don't make fun of them [ESL students] or anything. They just don't talk or do anything with them which makes it really hard."

All respondents perceived this situation as getting better and both Bill and Betty agreed that "it was very easy to make friends at this school."

Almadina in Transition

Wiebe et al.(1999) identified Almadina's School Policy Manual as seeking to promote:

- a safe, secure, orderly, clean and healthy environment for learning and teaching;
- emphasis on positive behavior and preventative discipline;
- zero tolerance for violence and racism (p. 17).

According to the participants interviewed, not one of the aforementioned statements was being adhered to when they first arrived at Almadina. Tom summarized their belief that "this school used to be a lot meaner" while Sue shared the following thoughts about her first experiences at Almadina: "In the beginning it was really, really bad. Like if a white person was walking down the street they [the students] would yell at them. It was really bad."

According to the students interviewed the situation at Almadina has changed substantially over the past year. The area of change cited immediately by all respondents was the school environment itself. Betty and Tom observed, "the school is a lot cleaner this year" while Bill added, "there used to be a lot of writing on the tables and in the hallways and stuff. Now they and the washrooms are much cleaner." Sally cited the area of school pride as having improved:

> Students didn't really take pride in the school last year. They'd say, oh there's not many cool people in this school and this and that. Now, everybody's getting along with each other and when you talk to other people about it, they have a better idea of the school.

She also noted that this year, "the school has put a barrier between the junior high and the elementary. Now everyone is getting along so well."

Respondents felt that instructional changes made this year have improved the quality of programming offered at Almadina. Sue stated when she first arrived at Almadina:

> The curriculum was really easy and a lot of us needed harder stuff because the stuff they gave us we already knew. They were treating us all like ESL students and we weren't. Now the ESL students get what they need and we get what we need.

She added that, "now if you have trouble in a subject, let's say in math, they [the teachers] let you stay in after school, at lunchtime, whenever. That's been good." Sally again cited the literacy blocks as contributing to a more positive learning environment: "It was hard before for the students to stay on task because there were all these ESL kids coming in with the kids that could already speak English. This year, everybody is learning at their own level."

Discipline was also an area cited by respondents as having become more consistent this year. Sally noted when she first started at Almadina "things were a bit rocky. Some kids weren't listening to the rules and sort of taking advantage...Lately it's been fine." Tom echoed those sentiments: "I don't go to the office often but from what I hear it's more strict...As well the teachers have changed and give more lectures about how to behave and stuff. I think this has got to the kids." Sally felt that the increased focus on discipline has translated into more consistent learning on the part of the students: "I see so many kids that used to be very bad and not pay attention in class...now they're learning better, learning to put more effort into things." Overall the participants stated that "this year we are just feeling safer in this school."

Most respondents noted the quality of teaching instruction has improved over past years. Sally summarized these perceptions:

> Before the teachers would sort of get hurt or mad by what the students would say. Now you're allowed to have a positive relationship with the teachers. You can joke with them and they will tell you stories and make you realize that they are human too.

Sue commented on the consistency of the administration: "We never had the same principal before which got pretty frustrating because you'd get used to the rules and then you have to put up with new rules. I'm finding I'm used to everything here now." Other respondents commented in regards to the teaching staff and the administration, "they are more understanding" and "they have started caring more."

The issue of socialization amongst students and tolerance for others was another area participants mentioned as having evolved since their arrival at Almadina. Sue reflected on her personal experiences by stating: "People aren't really judged anymore. When I started, they [English speaking students] would not leave the ESL students alone. Now they don't do anything." Tom supported this statement: "Before they [the ESL students] weren't really wanted and they were always called names and stuff. Now we talk, play games and soccer together." Sally felt that, particularly at the younger grades, students were becoming much more accepting of the new arrivals. She observed amongst the children: "They'll be lots of different kinds of kids and they have fun with each other and learn from each other. Nobody makes fun of where you're from or what religion you are."

Summary

Consensus among participants was Almadina is a much improved school over last year and that "people are pulling together more" and "learning with each other," something they felt was not evident in past years. Respondents perceived that, because the structure was more consistent and the staff and administration more caring and willing to share their time, the students were now getting along better and working together more. Most cited the physical environment of the school as also having improved and that overall, student pride was becoming more evident.

Regarding the issue of tolerance and acceptance of others, most respondents observed improvement over past years. However more than one participant commented there were still students at the school who had racist tendencies and they expressed uncertainty regarding how welcome new immigrants and students of diverse cultural backgrounds to the school would be.

Few comments were shared regarding Almadina's future but most felt that they had benefited from the programming offered at Almadina and believed that they were being well prepared for their entrance into senior high school.

Board Member Profile

Of the seven board members of the Almadina Charter School, two volunteered for this study. Both have, or have had children attending Almadina and both have been involved with Almadina since 1996 although only one member has been with the board since that time.

Pseudonyms for each participant were assigned to try and assure confidentiality and anonymity although both were informed, prior to the interviews, that there may be speculation regarding whom stated what due to the relatively small size of the respondent group. For the purpose of this study the two board members will be referred to as Gene and Don.

For the purpose of this chapter, an analysis of the interview with the board members yielded information which was categorized both inductively and deductively based on the questions posed in the interview guide. These categories were: (a) Almadina as a unique site for providing innovative programming, (b) staffing and resources of Almadina in meeting the needs of the students enrolled there, (c) reasons why parents choose Almadina over traditional public or separate schools, (d) cultural diversity at Almadina and, (e) changes that have occurred at Almadina over the past year. A discussion of the aforementioned points follows.

Almadina as an Innovative Site

Bosetti et al. (2000) noted that as innovative sites, charter schools "are founded by parents and educators committed to seeking visions of schooling they could not realize in the regular public system" (p. 1). Both respondents indicated this as being true for Almadina and cited a belief that, "a charter school can help develop the education of immigrants as well as native Canadians" so the students "acquire good English skills...that can be transferable to the larger community of the city in which we reside."

Don conceded that, although the mandate of the school was to provide innovative programming through a structured ESL program, it was not until this year that "the theme of ESL was implemented." He further commented: "This was a place where ESL students attended but if all you have is immigrant students attending, it doesn't mean its enough". Both members cited the hard work in establishing a school, ignorance on the part of the parents, and a lack of support on the part of Alberta Learning as contributing to Almadina's tumultuous beginning. Don highlighted this belief by stating that those granting the charter were in part, experimenting with Almadina and interfered only "after damage had been done."

Respondents felt that at present, the ESL program which was initially envisioned is being offered and is unique from other public schools in that: "We deliver services to any person who needs English language instruction, beyond the three years [that students are funded for]. Here we believe it can take up to seven years." Gene further added: "We serve not only ESL students who come here but also students who were born here but have difficulty with their sounds, their pronunciation."

Don described the individual assessment of students as another unique facet of Almadina:

> The board has worked very hard to produce a profile on every student....so we can say over here is an ESL student and if it's ESL, which year-one, two, three? Now this labeling allows the classroom teacher to know student number 17 is so and so, number 16 is so and so, etc.

Don did caution however that this process of offering a sound ESL program needed at least five years "to bear fruit" and he emphasized it will "need stringent monitoring from Alberta learning on behalf of this school so we know we are going in the right direction."

Gene described the fact that Almadina having it's own board in itself makes it a unique site: "In most districts you never see the board members in the public school. At Almadina, the staff and parents can meet with them any time, every day if you wanted. There is really access between the leader of the school and the parents."

Both participants believed that Almadina, if supported and properly monitored, has a good future ahead and that they are now offering "a unique structured ESL program that can be used and outlined for future ESL schools."

Staffing and Resources

Two of the duties of the Almadina school board, as defined under By-law VI of the Almadina School Society are to (a) review personnel decisions and, (b) administer finances. Don believed at present the staffing at Almadina is sufficient to meet the needs of the students enrolled there and shared these thoughts: "We have a very low teacher/student ratio. And students there are smart. If you have normal students with normal IQs, you can deliver a good education." Gene also believed that class sizes, especially in the literacy blocks were adequate and cited the board's belief that: "We [the board and the administration] have decided that the limit in a class should be no more than 25 students. If there is more than 25 students they [the teachers] have a number of teaching assistants to help them."

If administration deemed that additional staffing was required, Gene felt the support of the board was there: "Anything the administration wants for the teaching and instruction of the students...the board will look at their budget and accept it. We want the teachers to feel comfortable with what they are doing."

Although the number of teaching staff at Almadina was perceived as being sufficient, both respondents shared a belief that teachers at Almadina should be held more accountable for student progress. Gene remarked, "we want to have good records to make sure the students are moving, improving. Not just the child doesn't understand anything, that's not true." Don supported this view: "They [the teachers] can't say because they are ESL students we should not have high expectations. That is just not practical and not necessarily true. Numbers are important so we can continue to grow. We would like to see the teachers provide histograms [of student growth]."

Both members cited the fact that as a board, they have addressed the discipline concerns of the staff and now it was time to start showing improvement in student achievement test scores. Don explained:

> When we took over it was chaos to the extent, the teachers told us, if a bomb went off in the hallway, it would be hard to hear it. This year the board sent a message, and it was a strong message, that we want good discipline and a normal school. When we met with the teachers and asked them about the [current] situation they said fantastic; we are relieved. Now we want them to deliver the education.

Gene also believed that Almadina, as an ESL school, should not be exempt from achieving high results on provincial exams but inferred that at present, Alberta Learning needs to set more realistic standards given the school's past history and the population which it serves.

Don stated quite candidly that he wanted to see demonstrated growth on this year's achievement exam test scores: "My magic number is to see a 25 percent improvement, " a statement he supported by illustrating, "I mean how can I convince you to bring your child here if the achievement test results are at 40 percent ?" Don felt that there was no apparent reason for poor student achievement scores, a claim he supported by citing the results of a local private language school with a similar population:

> Here you have the same class sizes, and you have more teachers here than there, and the average salary here is double, more than double. Yet their achievement scores are in the 90's. Why is it 55 plus here and there the scores are in the 90s? So there is an ESL school where the students score in the 90's and we want these students to score in the 90's.

Don remarked that the board was hoping the staff at Almadina would offer some indications of growth as early as February, 2000 but indicated this has not happened. He expressed his disappointment and stated the expectations of the board were: "Rather than saying this school is great, everything is fine, it is clean, it's conducive to education we believe we'll give it six [more] months and then we want to see some results."

In regards to resources, few references were made to the adequacy of materials available in meeting the needs of the ESL students enrolled at Almadina. Gene did point out that Almadina has a new library and computer lab and reiterated that if administration requires something to meet the learning needs of the children, "the board will study the proposal and then approve it."

Parental Choice

Both respondents acknowledged that the purpose Almadina was founded in the first place was for "children to acquire the English skills to better integrate into society." Don and Gene conceded however that "there are many reasons" why parents opt to have their children attend Almadina with the predominant Arabic population being the primary one cited. Don offered: "To be frank, many parents have the same perception, that this is an Arabic or Muslim school and many parents send their children to learn Arabic" even though, he added, "I'm sure the students spend 85 percent plus of their time learning English and the Alberta program of studies." Gene echoed this belief: "Some people believe that it's a good idea to learn their mother language [Arabic], even though it may only be 100-150 hours per year."

Don believed that this perception of the school being an Arabic or Muslim school has had both its advantages and disadvantages. He expressed these thoughts: "We shouldn't forget that this perception helped, temporarily, having this school open. If the Arabic community did not send their children in the beginning, we would not have an ESL school." Don added now that the school is meeting its mandate of offering a structured ESL program, the current population, "can choose to benefit from it or not."

Participants also believed that apart from cultural reasons, there were parents sending their children here for the English program offered. Gene felt many parents acknowledged that Almadina offered, "more support, more professional people and more time for their children to benefit from studying English." Don also perceived that, although some parents may not know about the "fine details" of the structured language program offered, "they know that the school is delivering English."

Gene cited two additional reasons for parents choosing Almadina over other public schools which may be closer to their homes; socialization and transportation. He felt that, "here the kids are happy with their friends and because some of them are from the same country they have more friends than if they were in the public [system]." In addition Gene indicated that some parents considered their local school still too far from home and by opting to attend Almadina, "somebody can look after their kids because they provide a transportation system."

Cultural Diversity

As board members, both respondents were well aware that the students being served at Almadina differed from the diverse population of "descendants of first generation Canadian families and new immigrant population" envisioned in the schools mandate. However both Don and Gene emphasized that, as a public school, the doors have always been open to students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Don noted that when Almadina opened to the public in 1996, "we reserved 50 seats for the neighboring community to come to this school. The secretary was told not to accept anymore students from the Arabic community because we wanted to also deliver education to the people of this neighborhood."

Why this never materialized Don felt, was due in part to outside influences and the negative press that they received when first starting out: "There were people who told the public that this is an Arabic Muslim school. They didn't talk about it being an ESL school, so now we need to promote this school to change this perception."

Both members felt they would like to encourage diversity but, "we cannot knock door to door. It's open, it's advertised. If someone wants to bring their kids from a different culture they are more than welcome." Gene mentioned that this year the school has developed a brochure to send to different agencies who provide services to immigrant populations, something he hoped "they [new immigrants] will see and be in touch with the school."

Although a more diverse population is the desired outcome, Gene highlighted the positive aspects of serving a distinct cultural group: "The students know each other better and the staff can focus on their needs better. It's like a small society." He felt that, if students with different cultural backgrounds came to Almadina now, "they might not understand the [predominant] culture and that might take time," but admitted "in this school that time might be a little bit limited." Gene also discussed the complexities in providing Heritage Language programs beyond French and Arabic if the student population at Almadina suddenly became more culturally diverse:

> If 50 Russian students showed up next year, the board would take it [expanding the Heritage Language Program] into consideration. But we would need sufficient numbers. We simply can not take a few students and say okay, tomorrow we will teach them Russian.

Beyond enhancing cultural diversification, Don mentioned a desire to have more native English speaking students integrated into Almadina so the ESL students enrolled there "can hear the pronunciations of a native speaker as opposed to that of an immigrant student." He admitted that the strength of Almadina is the English programming that they now offer but "its weakness is integration" and that although desirable, "you can't provide everything." Don continued that at present, "it is up to the parent to decide. If it is integration that they are seeking, than the child should go to the public school where there is only one ESL student." He added however "the weakness of the public school is delivering English language to the immigrant" which he now felt was "the strength of Almadina."

Almadina in Transition

Wiebe et al.(1999) wrote, "if Almadina Charter School is to thrive as a unique Charter institution within the public education system, it is recommended that:

> The board, in consultation with the school administration, the teaching staff and the parents identify, describe, and make explicit to students and parents the school mandate that shall receive the major focus in Almadina School (p. 18).

Don acknowledged that until this year "the theme of ESL wasn't implemented" but further commented that "every sign, every indication is that it is now going in the right direction." Gene mentioned that this year an ESL Programming Plan [refer to Appendix E for an overview] was developed to address concerns brought forth by Alberta Learning that the ESL mandate of the school was not being served. He cited that unlike in the past, "this plan was developed based on "the sharing of opinions of the board, administration, parents, and the students in realizing what is in the best interest of the [Almadina Charter School] Society." How successful the plan has been, Gene offered few insights but pointed out: "If the plan is not a success the Minister of Education will not be renewing our charter for another year and this school will not be allowed to continue."

While sharing a belief that Almadina now provides the structured ESL programming as proposed in it's mandate, few additional changes were observed by the respondents. Don did remark that this year the board has addressed staff concerns regarding discipline and shared these thoughts:

> This year we implemented a strong discipline policy, starting with the board members and the board member's children who have taken advantage of their parent's position in the past. You can't deliver education without discipline and board members were made aware that everybody should wear the hat of a board member, not a parent.

Both members inferred that the primary changes they would like to see were in regards to achievement test results but acknowledged "this takes time." Don offered the analogy: "This is the first year of the program and although we have yet to see the fruit, the plant is growing." He further commented that, "for this plant to grow" Almadina needed "more stringent" monitoring on behalf of Alberta Learning, "to be assured that Almadina is going in the right direction." He claimed that with consistent monitoring and a strong commitment to increasing achievement test scores, not only will Almadina thrive but "the data generated from this school can, in the future be used to apply for other ESL schools."

Summary

Both respondents believed that, unlike in past years, the Almadina Charter School is delivering the ESL and language programming which was initially proposed in its mandate. They credited the hard work of the board members as well as various other stakeholders with turning the program around although both felt, due to their focus on achievement test results, that it was too early to determine how successful the new programming has been.

A lack of monitoring on behalf of Alberta Learning and poor press when Almadina first opened its doors were cited as reasons contributing to Almadina's tumultuous beginning. As one respondent stated, "to enable us to grow we will need at least five years of stringent monitoring by Alberta learning." Respondents also inferred that staff members needed to have higher expectations of the students enrolled there if they were to demonstrate the achievement results that these two board members felt they were capable of.

Both members expressed the opinion that they would not be content with the status quo of Almadina and they not only wanted to see this school survive but also to grow. One respondent felt he would like to see Almadina expand "to four sectors of the city" while another believed that new locations were needed "to cut down on traffic noise and increase student learning."

In regards to cultural diversity, respondents emphasized that "the doors have always been open to students from other cultures" but inferred that, until word gets out that this is an ESL school and not just a Muslim or Arabic school, Almadina will continue serving the population that currently opts to enroll there.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS AND THEMES

According to Roessingh (1999), "as the new millennium approaches, new patterns of immigration to Canada, and hence Alberta, are emerging and forcing educators to rethink the goals of ESL instruction. The current wave of immigrants has expectations for academic success" (p. 72). The Almadina Charter School was founded in 1996 with a mission statement propounding to do just that. It stated that the goal of the institution was to "increase the academic success rate of students who have English as a Second Language by actively involving students, teachers, and parents in every aspect of the educational process" thus graduating "responsible and skilled students who will become academically successful and confident in their efforts to graduate from any Alberta accredited high school (Application, p.52, cited in Bosetti et al, 2000, p. 22). Therefore this study was designed to examine the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and board members in regards to how they feel the Almadina school is meeting the needs of the ESL students enrolled there.

As perceptions among respondents varied, the similarities and differences among participant's experiences are discussed in this chapter based on the themes which were described, or emerged in Chapter Four. Many of the findings discussed have been referenced to conclusions and recommendations made in the *Growth Report* (1999), which was submitted to the superintendent of the Almadina Charter School on June 8th, 1999. Additional comments made by both the superintendent of the Almadina Charter School and Dr. Hetty Roessingh have also been added in this discussion to complement statements made by the four other respondent groups.

The findings are categorized and discussed under the headings (a) Almadina as a unique site for providing innovative programming, (b) staffing and resources of Almadina in meeting the needs of the students enrolled there, (c) reasons why parents choose Almadina over traditional public or separate schools, (d) cultural diversity at

Almadina and, (e) changes that have occurred at Almadina over the past year. A discussion of the aforementioned points follows.

Almadina as an Innovative Site

ESL Programming

Prior to the 1999-2000 school year, Wiebe et al. (1999) posited that "Almadina Charter School has a great deal of work to do before it can effectively achieve its mandate, in regards to ESL program and educational planning" (p. 22). They further added, "the greatest challenge facing Almadina is the short period of time that the school has to demonstrate significant development of the ESL mandate (p. 22)." It appears, based on participant responses, that all stakeholders involved in Almadina have risen to this challenge.

All groups of participants gave similar responses in citing the literacy block approach and language across the curriculum focus as being the innovative practices addressing the mandate of the school. The principal highlighted that students are now streamed into appropriate language level classes which would be difficult "if you only had a couple of ESL students in a class." She further commented that this approach allowed for a gradual progression through the levels with the end result being students attending "regular" classes on a full time basis. Teacher respondents also described the literacy block approach as unique with Sandy summarizing their thoughts: "We're trying to group students so that it is more homogeneous, within age groups. The weaker age group students, linguistically are now with other weaker students, the strong students with the stronger students."

The student respondent group also observed a positive change in their language arts programming this year. As one participant observed: "Based on your level of language arts you're now placed with kids in a similar group because it's hard when there's kids at a higher level but they have to be set back because there is other people who need help." Finally the board members interviewed conceded that prior to this year, no structured ESL program was offered but felt that this year the board, administration, staff, and students had banded together and were now offering "a unique structured ESL program that can be used and outlined for future ESL schools."

An interview conducted with Dr. Hetty Roessingh, whose hard work and background knowledge in ESL have been key factors in turning the school around this year, supported respondent's claims. Although removed from the daily operation of the school, Dr. Roessingh has been tracking their progress and felt "they are really, really working hard on their language across the curriculum thrust, their literacy blocks and their ESL program." She further added, "a year ago I'd also done some work and I have to say it felt like an angry place, a much less organized place...It's settled in quite a bit."

Individual Assessment of Students

Wiebe et al. recommended in their Growth Report (1999) that Almadina "accurately identify the English proficiency of all ESL students" and "establish an ESL student portfolio in order to track the development of English language proficiency over time (p. 22). Consensus among most respondent groups was that this is happening. Ms. Douglas noted: "In September we did a lot of baseline testing in the language area and put together language portfolios on each and every student here." She added, "I think we have a real clear picture of who we've got in our classes for the first time." Staff respondents also identified a change in the assessment of individual students this year. Sandy noted, "they are given quite a battery of tests in September...to objectively get a level of where students are at, which other schools don't do." Staff members further cited that, in addition to formal testing, weekly meetings were held where the teachers "go through a list of all the kids and basically see how each one is doing and what we can do for them. It's very time consuming but well worth it."

Board members observed that the individual assessment of students was a priority this year and claimed "the board has worked very hard this year to produce a profile on every student." Although not cited as formal assessment, student respondents did perceive they were receiving more individualized attention at this school as summarized by Tom: "Kids that used to go here and went to public schools tell me there was way more help here."

Again Dr. Roessingh supported the beliefs of the participants: "As I understand it they've really put a tremendous amount of effort this year in collecting baseline data and really taken seriously the idea that they are going to be held accountable for some measurable outcomes."

Student Preparedness for High School

Information gleaned from participants indicated uncertainty regarding the extent that students were prepared for entry into "mainstream schooling" as a result of the programming offered at Almadina. The student respondent group indicated benefiting from the instruction offered at Almadina whereas the principal opted to take a "wait and see" approach. She stated that the tracking process has just begun so that "we're ready to not say, well....I think we are."

Staff members generally felt that the students were better prepared as a result of instruction received at Almadina but were uncertain regarding the success they would experience in high school. Sandy indicated that "the support they're getting here will help them have a better chance of success" but added that "the parents need to know they are not getting the curriculum that they will be getting at so and so junior high school down the street." Chris also mentioned was a need to "water down" much of the program she offers and noted, "I don't know if I've prepared them enough because I think they should be doing much more." Although there were no comments offered on behalf of the board members, both mentioned that their children had gone on from Almadina and experienced success. Don stated that his children were "currently on the honor list in high school" while Gene stated that "my child, who has graduated from Almadina and is currently in high school, is doing very well."

The superintendent of Almadina, when asked to express his thoughts on how well the school had prepared students for reintegration into mainstream schooling, believed that: "For the students who graduated up until last June I would say no [they were not prepared]. But I certainly hope so based on what is happening now." Dr. Roessingh's comments mirrored the uncertainty reflected in statements made by the principal and staff respondents. She used the analogy, "those kids will always be chasing a moving train" and added "the Almadina kids aren't making one year of growth for one year of schooling because they're handling two languages. We don't know the effects [of this program].... It's unique and I've never seen a school like it."

Board Interaction

Wiebe et al. remarked, in regards to relations between the board and Almadina's staff that, "a number of staff members found the school board supportive and interested in finding balanced solutions to problems faced by the school" while "other staff members recalled board decisions and actions that lowered the morale of the staff" (p. 52). Although daily governance was cited by one board member as contributing to the uniqueness of Almadina, staff perceptions regarding this claim appear to still conflict. While Jamie stated, "this year there is a lot more staff to board interaction" Sandy commented, "I've rarely seen school board members in the school, to see what's going on, on a daily basis."

Staffing and Resources

Class Size

Wiebe et al. identified the educational services provided at Almadina as "an under-staffed supplemental program of instruction" (p. 21) and recommended that Almadina "allocate a compliment of staff from the basic instructional grant, in keeping with the school's designated Pupil-Teacher ratio, to support this core aspect of ESL education"

(p. 22).

All respondents believed that, to some extent, this recommendation was being addressed and cited low pupil-teacher ratios in the literacy blocks with having class sizes averaging eleven to twelve students "of basically the same ability level."

Opinions among participants regarding regular class sizes however, tended to conflict. While most respondents agreed that "class sizes are really no different than you would find at a traditional public school" most staff participants inferred, given the special needs of the population enrolled at Almadina, that "we either need to make class sizes smaller or we need more teachers." Sandy further commented that by having large class sizes of twenty five to thirty kids "it kind of negates the value of us streaming."

Perceptions also varied regarding the appropriate number of teacher aides needed to assist in the regular classrooms. While respondents from the board claimed "a number of teaching assistants available to help [teachers]" for classes over 25 students, most staff members interviewed felt "we could use a few more aides for specific purposes."

From the student respondent's perspective, regular class sizes were not viewed as any different to those found in traditional public schools and not one of the students interviewed felt that the integration of ESL students hindered or inhibited the pace of their instruction in any way. As Tom noted: "They're [the ESL students] just separated...They read something or learn something else or there's usually two teachers. One teacher tells them what to do and the other teaches us."

ESL Teaching Staff

Also recommended by Wiebe et al. was that Almadina increase its ESL staff "to four full time ESL teachers and two full-time qualified ESL aides in order to serve the 178 ESL students effectively" (p. 24). As identified in the *Follow-Up Action Plan to the School Growth Report* (1999) Almadina has partially met this requirement (p. 2).

As of the 1999-2000 school year, Ms. Douglas noted "there are three full time ESL specialists and we have three teaching assistants who specialize in helping the ESL program and or providing bilingual education as well." Ms. Douglas further commented that, in order to do this, "we have had to give up other services because we want to spend every extra cent we have on funding our ESL program and our language arts program." Although sacrifices have been made, Ms. Douglas felt that this priority on quality ESL staffing will allow Almadina to "continue to provide a superlative, language focused program here at the school."

In regards to how those monitoring Almadina's progress perceive their current ESL program, Ms Douglas stated that feedback received from Alberta Learning indicates: "We are providing a program that is not easily presented in a traditional public school " and that they have acknowledged "the shape and format of the program could not be delivered in a regular school setting."

Staff Cohesiveness and Morale

As identified in the *Growth Report* (1999), "the Almadina Charter School has a teaching staff who seem willing to take on the challenge [of effectively achieving the school's mandate], but who feel incapable of achieving the goal without a significant change in both the priority and level of support awarded to the task" (p.21). Almost all staff participants cited an improvement in the level of support they were receiving this year as opposed to the past as well as a greater sense of direction. Jamie summarized these beliefs: "The board has been very supportive this year and discipline has been more consistent. Those things have helped to make it a better place than it was in previous years." There also appeared to be consensus amongst most staff respondents that consistent administrative practices have further given a sense of direction, reflected in Chris' comment: "In the beginning there was no standard set and the administration was constantly changing over. Now we have a very strong administrator and we're becoming much more consistent."

Staff morale was also cited as having improved this year as a result of the increased sense of direction. As noted by Ms. Douglas: “You can imagine what a beating the morale took in past years, where teachers were unsure if they’re doing the right thing and not feeling supported and confused.” She now felt that, unlike in past years, “the teachers feel good that there’s actually a vision for the school and something that they themselves can take pride in building and improving.” This was supported by Pat who claimed that teachers “are starting to feel their efforts are being recognized” and Jamie who indicated that “most people are really interested in coming back next year and have mostly positive things to say about the school.” Dr. Roessingh also commented that morale among the staff appears to have improved: “A year ago there was lots of angry people, many leaving, saying they couldn’t wait to get out. That’s gone now.”

The hard work and commitment that the Almadina staff has demonstrated this year has not gone unnoticed. Pat expressed a belief that “a lot of teachers work a lot harder here than you’d find in a public school” a statement supported by the principal who felt “I’ve got a very dedicated staff here, one that works very well here and we meet often.” This was further commented on by the superintendent of the Almadina Charter School who added: “I don’t know of any other school where the staff would accept what we put on their shoulders. They’re a remarkable crew.”

Counselors

A further recommendation made by Wiebe et al was that “a counseling program designated for Almadina Charter School be implemented and its staffing *be distinct* from that of the school’s administration” (p. 46). As identified in the *Follow-Up Action Plan to the School Growth Report* (1999) this has yet to be completed (p. 7).

Although it appears the principal and vice principal have taken on these duties and a student advisory council has been formed, it is still an issue, as cited by two staff respondents, that needs to be addressed. Sandy expressed these thoughts: “The fact that a lot of our kids have such traumatic backgrounds, I think what we need, well what all the schools in this city need, are more counselors, who in this case speak Arabic." This sentiment was also supported by the superintendent who stated: "We need a counselor, someone that can help kids through some of their social problems and adjustment problems. Someone who can spend time working with the kids to make decisions on their own and set goals for themselves." The superintendent and the principal acknowledged however that "the budget is what it is" and it was inferred that additional staffing was unlikely in the future.

Resources

A further area of concern identified in *The Growth Report* was the "lack of priority assigned to the ESL mandate," characterized by, amongst other things, "limited educational materials to support an ESL instructional program" (p. 20). Again most respondents felt that this concern was being addressed this year, with the principal offering: "if you look at our budget you could see we have spent a considerable amount of money getting materials that meet the curricular goals of our students." All respondent groups interviewed highlighted the addition of a new library as the primary improvement over past years. Sue believed that, for the students, "it has really helped because now if you need to do research, you can come here and get help from the librarian on that research." Sandy indicated that, although Almadina was still building its resource base, there has been improvement over past years: "When I first came here there were maybe a few resources in the library and whatever the teachers brought. Now...the library has been ordering a lot of new materials. It's coming but it takes time." Ms. Douglas supported Sandy's comments and noted: "Do we have everything we need? No. Will we ever? No. But we're certainly a lot closer and I think that is another reason why teachers feel more comfortable staying because they now have the tools that they need to do the job."

The new library was also identified by board members interviewed as an indication that improved resources were a priority this year in meeting the School's ESL mandate. Gene further added that, if educational resources are required to meet the educational needs of the students enrolled at Almadina, "the board will study the proposal and approve it."

Parental Choice

Cultural Background

When students, grades five through nine were asked why their parents chose to send them to this school as opposed to public or separate schools closer to their homes, Wiebe et al noted: "most of them stated they chose Almadina because it's an Arabic speaking school, and most of their parents knew each other because they have the same culture (i.e…a Muslim heritage)" (p. 45). This observation was overwhelmingly supported by all respondent groups interviewed. Ms. Douglas stated that, because Almadina offers a Heritage Language Program where students are given the opportunity to read, write, listen and speak in Arabic, some parents send their children to this school because "they [the parents] want their children to continue to have a connection with their background and their parents former country of residence." Staff respondents also expressed a belief that it was for cultural reasons, and not for the ESL programming offered, that parents opted for Almadina. Two of the staff participants went so far as to claim: "I don't think a lot of parents even realize that it's an ESL school."

Most students interviewed also cited their cultural background as the primary reason their parents opted to have them attend this school. Sally expressed her thoughts that, "my parents have a really good understanding of what's going on and they have Friday prayers because most of the children are Muslim" while Sue stated, "my parents wanted me to learn Arabic." The two board members also cited cultural reasons with Don offering: "To be frank, many parents have the same perception, that this is an Arabic or Muslim school and many parents send their children to learn

Arabic."

Changing Perception

Wiebe et al. recommended in the *Growth Report* that "the school clarify its ESL mandate with parents whose children do not require ESL educational support" (p. 24). Based on the comments made by those interviewed it appears this awareness has not occurred although Ms. Douglas felt "the perception is changing." She further commented:

> I think the kinds of students that started here, even though originally the school was going to be focused on ESL, were looking for a comfortable place. [But] here we are in year four and we've refocused our energies on ESL and as I go through the registration process for next year I find we are getting more parents that call for the reasons of the charter, that this is an ESL school.

Two staff members interviewed also believed the perception of Almadina as being an Arabic or Muslim School is beginning to change. Chris shared her belief that, "I think a lot of the parents are now informed of what this school is all about because I don't think they knew" while Jamie added that the literacy blocks offered this year "has been a big selling point for us."

The board members interviewed, while still acknowledging that most parents opt to have their children attend this school for cultural reasons, did express a belief that many parents also felt Almadina offered: "more support, more professional people and more time for their children to benefit from studying English." This was supported by Sally who acknowledged that although she was most likely at Almadina for cultural reasons: "They [her parents] really like how the teachers spend time to talk to you and explain stuff."

Parental Involvement

As indicated by Wiebe et al., "the potential for parents to be actively involved in the operation of Almadina Charter School was immense, but still waiting to happen" (p. 53). They recommended:

- Almadina Charter School, with the direct help of its parent council, initiate measures to increase the participation rates of parents at parent-teacher conferences and,
- Encourage parents to participate in the activities of Almadina Charter School in accordance with school procedure and board policy (p. 53).

Based on the responses of those interviewed, this does not appeared to have happened. Staff respondents indicated, "they'll do what they have to at home. But they don't get involved" and "I think there could be a lot more parent involvement." These views were supported by Ms. Douglas who felt that increased parental involvement was the one area that had not changed this year. When asked to expand, she cited the education level of many parents, work commitments, and the proximity of the school in relation to many parent's homes as contributing factors. She also noted that because parental involvement up to this year has been somewhat negative, many parents were taking a "wait and see" attitude regarding changes implemented this year. Ms. Douglas did add however that the addition of a monthly newsletter highlighting school events and activities had bore some increased interest among the parent population.

Cultural Diversity

Monoculturalism at Almadina

Wiebe et al claimed that early in the growth assessment process:

> The visiting team members were challenged by a confusion of characteristics that spawned the question: What kind of school is this? Is it an ESL school, or is it an Arabic language school, a bilingual school, or is it a Muslim Heritage School? (p.14).

As a result, one of the recommendations made in the *Growth Report* was that "a serious effort be made in future years to attract students from a variety of cultures to Almadina Charter School in order to make the student population more reflective of [this City's] multicultural society" (p.45) .

Although all respondents agreed that at present, the population served at Almadina was predominantly Arabic, most observed that their first priority this year was to establish a sound ESL program before trying to attract students from other cultures. As one board member claimed: "We have to work on (a) English education and then (b) integration," a comment supported by Ms. Douglas who mentioned, "I'm not about to start recruiting within other ethnic communities until I'm confident that we have ironed out the wrinkles that cropped up the first couple of years."

Positive Side of Monoculturalism

It was inferred by most respondents that there are distinct advantages in providing ESL programming to one predominant culture. Ms. Douglas noted that, when she first arrived at Almadina her belief was "as soon as we can get our house straightened out we would try to spread our wings and invite students from other cultures." She added however, that "I started to realize some of the value added to having a single group of students from a similar background. The students have a mutual understanding and help each other out with becoming more familiar with Canadian culture." Staff respondents also indicated that, "there's lots of people available to translate" and "from the predominance you're able to see how important socialization within the family is." Gene further commented that, by serving one distinct cultural group, "the students know each other better and the staff can focus on their needs better." One ESL student augmented this claim by adding, "if the English teacher told me something and I didn't understand it, someone would explain it to me in Arabic. It is easier."

The superintendent also shared his thoughts regarding Almadina's monocultural population: "I'm coming around to the feeling that there maybe a real place for a school where you have just one cultural group...I think the fact that they all speak one language allows you to do a lot more." His viewpoint was supported by Dr. Roessingh who noted, "if the first language develops properly, you can use it and transfer into English...I don't disagree with their Arabic language program. It could be a valuable tool and they could lose it if they move to a diversity model."

Negative Side of Monoculturalism

Also identified by most respondents were the negative aspects of serving one distinct cultural group, especially in terms of socialization and integration.

Tolerance in particular was cited by participants as an area of concern as summarized by Sandy's comments: "Tolerance [among cultures] needs to be addressed here much more and I don't think you can address it so much when it's predominantly one cultural group; that just engenders the horde mentality." The principal also addressed this issue: "I have to start working with these kids at an earlier age to have a better understanding, a better appreciation of people from other cultures, other than their own cultural background."

As reflected in the findings of Wiebe et al., most students interviewed felt that the "non-Muslim or non-Arabic students were as accepted in Almadina Charter School as students of the predominant religion and culture" (p. 35). However Sue indicated that there were still traces of racism within the student population: "Some of the ESL students still get made fun of because of the way they dress or speak, or smell differently." The superintendent himself expressed skepticism regarding the extent that non-Arabic or non-Muslim students would be accepted at Almadina:

> If, at the present time we were to bring in five or six different ethnic kids I think they would feel intimidated, outnumbered. We have had some difficulties with what you might call "Anglo-Saxon" kids coming in our school...they were discriminated against and within a few days they were gone to another school.

Although improvements regarding the tolerance issue were cited by a number of those interviewed, it was still the view of some staff respondents that "if I were of a different cultural background, I don't know how comfortable I would be sending my son or daughter here."

The absence of Canadian born English speaking students was also cited by respondents as a drawback to serving one predominant culture. As Ms. Douglas noted: "teaching a class that has children from many different countries is good because there is a real need for the students to speak English". Don also expressed a desire for greater integration so that ESL students "can hear the pronunciations of a native speaker as opposed to that of an immigrant student." He goes on to add however that: "You cannot provide everything. The strength of a [traditional] public school is integration. The strength of Almadina now, is delivering English language to the immigrant. It is now up to the parent." These viewpoints were supported by comments from Dr. Roessingh: "If you have a great deal of diversity like I had in [one particular school] with forty three different language groups, it forces the kids to speak English together. That doesn't happen at Almadina…which isn't entirely bad."

The Future

While most stakeholders interviewed, Dr. Roessingh included, acknowledged the challenges posed by increased diversification, a number of respondents felt that the school was making an effort to reach out to other cultural groups this year. Members from three of the four respondent groups identified that this year, Almadina has developed a brochure which will be distributed amongst agencies providing services to immigrants, in the hope that "they [the immigrants] will see it and be in touch with the school." Ms. Douglas inferred that public awareness regarding the programming offered at Almadina was becoming more evident and she mentioned that, "we're starting to get a wider number of ethnic groups interested at the lower levels and we've had a number of recent Asian immigrants who have applied for next year, in the elementary levels, grades one and two." This awareness was also commented on by Jamie who noted that, unlike in the past, the issue of diversity "is being mentioned a lot now."

When asked to comment on whether a monocultural population will affect Almadina's charter renewal, the superintendent stated: "Sure. Because we're not multicultural." Ms. Douglas however expressed a belief that the school will become more multicultural and stated: "The original intent of this charter was to have a diverse population. So that is our charter, and I've seen it work at other schools where I've been at." As for Dr. Roessingh, she preferred to take a wait and see attitude: "I know that for Almadina it [the diversity issue] is political. It's hotly imbedded with the charter itself. It's a question they are going to have to sort through I think."

Almadina in Transition

Change Agents

Wiebe et al. noted that "previously and subsequent to the *Alberta Education Monitoring Report* (Taylor, 1999) concerted efforts have been underway both by administration and staff to concentrate energy and resources towards fulfilling charter obligations" (p. 25). Based on responses given by the participant groups interviewed, this focus has continued into the 1999-2000 school year.

Ms. Douglas credited Wiebe et al. and their recommendations made in the *Growth Report* as being the catalyst needed to help Almadina refocus on their mandate. She commented: "I think when those basic concerns were met [the recommendations], then it became possible to re-focus and create the type of unique ESL program that the school had wanted to present initially." Gene highlighted that this year, unlike in the past, there was much more collaboration among the stakeholders at Almadina and cited the ESL Programming Plan, developed to address concerns by Alberta Learning, as an example of "the sharing of opinions of the board, administration, parents, students in realizing what is in the best interest of the [Almadina Charter School] Society."

Almost all respondents cited a more consistent administration and in particular, a strong principal, with guiding Almadina's restructuring this year. Sue noted that up to this year, "we never had the same principal before which got pretty frustrating because you'd get used to the rules and then have to put up with new rules. I'm finding I'm pretty used to everything here now." Beliefs of other respondent groups regarding the principal were perhaps best summarized by the superintendent: "Somebody up there was looking after us. Ms. Douglas did not start until the middle of September but she did more in two weeks than any previous administrator had done since Almadina opened in 1996."

The principal, the superintendent, and two staff respondents also acknowledged Dr. Roessingh's contributions in providing the theoretical framework for an ESL program. As Chris summarized: "She's been the backbone!"

Discipline

How problematic discipline has been at Almadina was made evident in the fact that Wiebe et al. dedicated an entire section (pp. 16-19) to addressing the issue. They noted, "in many classes observed, particularly in the junior high, students' inattentive, disrespectful, and disruptive behavior occupied most of the teacher's time and attention, as well as the attention of the other students" (p. 16). All respondents appeared pleased to report that this situation has improved greatly over last year.

Of all the participant groups interviewed, it was the teachers who appeared most vocal about the changes to Almadina's discipline policy. Sandy remarked: " I think one of the big initial changes has been a more concerted, coordinated effort to maintain a certain standard of discipline here at the school." Chris echoed this sentiment: "The biggest change I can think of this year is probably the discipline. When I first got here it was really, really bad...Since we've established a new discipline policy it has gotten much better."

Student respondents also acknowledged the discipline changes this year. Sally observed that when she first arrived at Almadina, "some kids weren't listening to the rules and sort of taking advantage...lately it's been fine." Sue reflected on the changes she has seen outside of the school: "In the beginning they [the students] were really bad. If they saw a white person walking down the street they would yell comments at them....It has gotten a lot better." Tom augmented upon these beliefs: "I don't go to the office often but from what I hear it's more strict...As well the teachers have changed and give us more lectures about how to behave and stuff. I think that has really got to the kids."

Ms Douglas felt that the discipline problem has been addressed as a result of Almadina's renewed focus on the mandate: "I think there is a better understanding [this year] on everyone's part, at every level-board, parents, teachers, and students of what the school is all about and I think it has improved the way the students behave here." The board members interviewed credited themselves with taking a much firmer stand this year. As Don noted: "When we took over it was chaos to the extent that teachers told us if you throw a bomb in the hallway you cannot hear it. Look now, you cannot hear a thing. [Our view was], you cannot deliver education without discipline." This viewpoint was supported by the superintendent who commented: "You have to give the board a lot of credit in that they're not second guessing the principal all the time...They have really set the tone [this year] and word is out that they mean business."

School Pride

Although only touched upon in the *Growth Report*, many respondents felt that student pride had improved dramatically over past years. Student respondents, in commenting on the physical condition of the school, noted "the school was a lot cleaner this year" and "there used to be a lot of writing on the tables and in the hallways and stuff. Now they and the washrooms are much cleaner." Ms. Douglas expanded upon these observations: "People tell me how it was last year and when I came in September it seemed like after every recess and lunch there was all sorts of garbage out there. Now the kids are picking up their own garbage." The superintendent also commented on the improvement: "it still has a lot to be desired but compared to last year, it [the school] is very clean."

Ms. Douglas felt the student's increased awareness of their physical surroundings was due in large part to the pride that they were beginning to express in attending Almadina: "There is more pride now in the physical location and more pride in the fact that they're here." This was augmented upon by Sally's statement:

> Students didn't really take pride in the school last year. They'd say, oh there's not many cool people in this school and this and that. Now everyone's getting along with each other and when you talk to other people about it, they have a better idea of the school.

Although improved pride in the school itself appeared evident, the lack of interaction between Almadina and other public schools was cited as a source of frustration for some respondents. The superintendent illustrated that "staff realize you can't develop your school climate atmosphere...or get pride into your school without some sort of extracurricular program." This was further commented upon by Jamie: "We would love to build a relationship with other schools but no public school wants to take the first step [in becoming involved with us]." Although the intramural program at the school was cited by more than one respondent as being "very good," Tom expressed his thoughts on Almadina's isolation: "A bad thing about this school is they aren't involved with public school stuff....sports or special days."

Board/Staff Interaction

Wiebe et al. reported that "the trust relationship between employees and the board had improved, but required further strengthening. Role responsibilities needed to be better defined, and then respected" (p. 53). Comments made by both the board and staff respondents left uncertainty regarding the extent to which this has taken place. On the one hand Jamie felt: "The board has been very supportive this year and it has helped to make it a better place." Sandy on the other hand offered: "I've rarely seen school board members in the school, to see what is going on, on a daily basis. You've one got one school for goodness sake, not a whole school division." Jamie commented that, "this year there is a lot more staff to board interaction. We've had a dinner with them and we've had meetings with them". Again Sandy refuted this claim: "We did have a day that was ostensibly to be a kind of share your program day...but there was too much animosity right away. You could tell they had their agenda and they wanted to pursue that agenda."

A comment made by Don also cast doubt regarding the board and the staff's trust relationship. In citing a meeting between the teachers and the board members he claimed: "We met with them [the teachers] and asked, how is the situation? We were told fine, we are relieved [regarding the discipline issue], etc. What we told them was, now deliver the education." The board members interviewed also expressed concern over the quality of teaching in regards to meeting the needs of the population enrolled at Almadina. Gene expressed a belief that "some of the teachers are doing very well while others are just spending time. Just because they have a university degree does not mean they're proficient enough to teach those kids." Both groups also appeared at odds over expectations regarding student achievement, as illustrated in the next category.

Student Achievement

Wiebe et al. reported that "Almadina School student achievement results on the provincial achievement tests for grades 3, 6, and 9 range from 4.4% to 52.7% below the minimal acceptable standard for the province"(p. 16). They further added:

> Teachers state that they must modify the Alberta curriculum in many ways because many of their students do not have the language skills to comprehend the content. Both the elementary and the junior high staff have proposed major changes in the school's programming to focus on the ESL needs of the students. The junior high teachers have concluded that it is impossible to teach the Alberta curriculum for junior high in this school because the students lack sufficient proficiency in English (p. 16).

These observations appear to reflect the sentiments of staff members interviewed. Sandy stated: "We shouldn't be worrying about the achievement exams so much because they don't even begin to measure what our students do know in their first language or their own culture." Chris echoed this belief: "I don't know how giving we are to these kids because I think we are going much slower, and this [focus on] achievement testing is lingering all the time." Jamie stated the board needs to be more cognizant of the population Almadina is serving: "They [the board] still don't recognize or acknowledge that the marks are not as important as the progress. Their progress over time, not the progress on one day, one month, one year."

Respondents from the board offered a different viewpoint. Both members inferred that the teaching staff should have higher expectations regarding the achievement results of their students, reflected in comments made by Don: "They [the teachers] can't say because they are ESL students we should not have high expectations. That is just not practical and not necessarily true." He supported this statement by citing the results of a local private language school with a similar population:

> Here you have the same class sizes, and you have more teachers here than there, and the average salary here is double, more than double. Yet their achievement scores are in the 90's. Why is it 55 plus here and there the scores are in the 90s? So there is an ESL school where the students score in the 90's and we want these students to score in the 90's.

Further evidence of the polarization between staff and board members regarding achievement exam expectations were highlighted in comments made by Don and Sandy. Don stated that, "rather than saying this school is great, everything is fine, it is clean, it's conducive to education, we believe we'll give it six more months and then we want to see some results." Sandy, on the other hand commented: "I speak for myself, but I think they [the board members] are very much in competition with past boards and a certain private school in the city. Their agenda is to say at the end of the year, see, we are the best board because our students did better on the achievement exams."

Ms. Douglas appeared neutral regarding the debate but did acknowledge that, in regards to those monitoring Almadina's progress: "When I speak to someone at

Alberta Learning they say we know your students are ESL and we understand that if x number of students don't achieve a passing grade we understand why." She did state however that, when the results are published, Almadina's marks still lead to misconceptions:

> The name of the school itself--Almadina Charter School--nothing lends itself to the fact that the majority of our students here speak another language as their mother tongue....I think we have to be better at promoting ourselves and reminding people that this is an ESL school and the people who write those tests are almost all required to do so.

As this is the first year of Almadina's restructuring process, it will be interesting to see if the changes made have impacted the growth and achievement as demonstrated by students over the past year. Don indicated that he hoped to see a marked growth on this year's achievement exam scores and stated that his "magic number is a 25 percent improvement." Dr. Roessingh believed that it was too early to tell but offered these thoughts: "I think they need to find more comfort in looking not at achievement, but in growth."

Summary

The findings arising from this study have been categorized and discussed under the headings (a) Almadina as a unique site for providing innovative programming, (b) staffing and resources of Almadina in meeting the needs of the students enrolled there, (c) reasons why parents choose Almadina over traditional public or separate schools, (d) cultural diversity at Almadina and, (e) changes that have occurred at Almadina over the past year. Within each heading are themes derived from the data.

Almost all categories have been referenced to conclusions and recommendations made in the *Growth Report*, a document submitted to the superintendent of the Almadina Charter School by Dr. Russ Wiebe et al. on June 8th, 1999. It was by no means my intent to address every recommendation made in the report but rather I hoped the ones cited would serve to complement the statements made by the various respondent groups.

In regards to Almadina being a unique site for providing innovative programming, almost all respondents cited the literacy block approach and language across the curriculum focus as attempting to meet this mandate. Participants also noted that this year, all students have been individually assessed so that each stakeholder at Almadina "has a real clear picture of who is in each class for the first time." Although most of those interviewed felt that Almadina's ESL students were receiving better ESL programming than they perhaps would have at a traditional public school, many were unsure of the success they would experience in high school given that some of the programming offered has needed to be "watered down."

Responses regarding class sizes in the literacy blocks and in the Heritage Language Programs ranged from "adequate" to "excellent" although beliefs regarding the appropriateness of regular class sizes varied. While most participants suggested that the regular class sizes were "probably no different than you would find in a regular public school" some staff respondents felt that, given Almadina's unique population, they were simply too large and "negate the value of streaming." The issue of hiring additional, qualified ESL staff was reported to have been addressed this year although some respondents claimed a need for additional teacher aides and a school councilor in order to meet the diverse needs of the individual students enrolled at Almadina.

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that most parents sent their children to Almadina for cultural reasons and the Arabic language program offered. However some of those interviewed felt that the perception of it being a Muslim School or an Arabic School was beginning to change and that Almadina was getting more parents interested in the school because of "the English instruction provided" and the fact that it is "an ESL school." Although it was hoped that Almadina would see an increase in parent involvement this year, this did not happen. Ms. Douglas believed there were many reasons for this while indicating that many parents were taking a "wait and see" attitude regarding the changes that have occurred this since September.

The fact that Almadina serves a predominantly Arabic or Muslim population was without question. However in meeting it's mandate that Almadina demonstrate greater diversity, the principal and some staff respondents believed that they first needed to establish the ESL program before trying "to attract students from a variety of cultures" (Wiebe et al. p. 45). Many of those interviewed believed there were positive aspects to working with one cultural group and cited a greater awareness of the culture, an ability to translate certain words and phrases, and greater access to resources as some of the benefits to the students. Negative aspects to serving one distinct population were also identified. A lack of tolerance and understanding for others, the absence of Canadian born English speaking students, and having the ability to converse in languages other than English were all seen as being detrimental to the academic and social growth of the students enrolled at Almadina.

All of those interviewed remarked on the positive changes that Almadina has gone through over this past year although, as Ms. Douglas stated, "we're not at Nirvana yet." Issues such as a much improved ESL program, a sound discipline policy, an increase in staff morale, and an improvement in the cleanliness and the pride that students are beginning to take in the school were acknowledged as helping Almadina meet it's mandate as set out in the charter. Although there still seems to be some dissension among the board members and the staff, especially in terms of expectations for achievement exam results, it appears too early to tell how the various stakeholders involved will come to terms with the whole "growth" versus "achievement" debate.

As mentioned in the literature review, research regarding ESL schools and providing ESL programming to one distinct culture is limited. However a summary of the related literature and how it applies to the themes identified in this chapter has been presented in the following table.

Table 2. Summary of Supporting Literature

Findings	Supporting Literature	Contradicting Literature	Not in Literature
1. Almadina as an Innovative Site			
• ESL Programming	Watt, Roessingh & Bosetti (1996) Roessingh (1995)		
• Individual Assessment	Watt, Roessingh & Bosetti (1996)		
• Student Preparedness for High School	Roessingh (1999) Watt & Roessingh (2000) Roessingh (1995) Derwing et al. (1999)		
• Board Interaction		Bosetti et al. (2000)	
2. Staffing and Resources			
• Class Size			xx
• ESL Teaching Staff	Bosetti & Watt (1995)		
• Staff Cohesiveness and Morale			xx
• Counselors			xx
• Resources			xx
3. Parental Choice			
• Cultural Background			xx
• Changing Perception			xx
• Parental Involvement		Bosetti et al. (2000)	
4. Cultural Diversity			
• Monoculturalism at Almadina			xx
• Positive Side of Monoculturalism			xx
• Negative Side of Monoculturalism	Derwing et al. (1999), Thomas & Willinsky (1997), Watt, Roessingh & Bosetti (1996) Kanno & Applebaum (1995)		
• The Future			xx
5. Almadina in Transition			
• Change Agents			xx

Table 2 (Continued)

• Discipline		xx
• School Pride		xx
• Board/Staff Interaction		xx
• Student Achievement	Bosetti et al. (2000)	
	Derwing et al. (2000)	
	Roessingh (1995)	
	Roessingh (1999)	
	Collier (1989)	

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

This chapter is divided into three sections: (a) responses to the research questions and conclusions, (b) recommendations for practice and theory, and (c) personal reflections.

Responses to the Research Questions and Conclusions

The research was guided by one main research question and four related sub-problems. The following addresses the sub-problems first and then offers responses to the main research question.

Sub-problem 1

What are the needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) students?

Information gleaned from the literature indicated that ESL students experience success in an environment which offers both academic and emotional support, especially when first beginning their English language programming.

As identified by Watt et al. (1996), ESL students are "vulnerable to early school-leaving at predictable and identifiable points" (p. 213) in their educational and cultural adjustment to school life here in Canada. They further reported that these points are characterized by an eight stage progression towards "acclimatization to the Canadian way in the context of the culture of the school" (p. 203) whereby students were particularly vulnerable to dropping out at the fourth stage (adjusting to school life) and the sixth stage (alienation).

In regards to the "adjusting to school life" stage, Watt et al. (1996) stated that "shyness and fear appear to be the major barriers to participation at this early stage and fuel the process of marginalization, withdrawal, and falling out" (p. 217). This observation was supported by Derwing et al. (1999) who also found that, of the fifteen ESL students they interviewed "almost all mentioned that developing relationships with native English speaking classmates, both socially and academically, was an important contributing factor to a successful school experience" (p. 539). They contend that in meeting the needs of the ESL students, "there is a clear need for teachers to encourage and promote the development of not only interactions but also relationships with native English speaking peers" (p. 544).

Another area warranting attention is the amount of support that ESL students receive in our province. ESL students are currently funded for a maximum of three years and the oldest an ESL student can be in order to receive this funding is "the year in which a student turns 19 before September 1" (Derwing et al., 1999, p. 536). This in itself poses a major handicap to the ESL student for as Collier (1989) suggested:

> Immigrants arriving at ages 8 to 12, with at least 2 years of L1 [first language] schooling in their home country, take 5 to 7 years to reach the level of average performance by native speakers on L2 standardized tests in reading, social studies, and science when they are schooled exclusively in the second language after arrival in the host country (p. 527).

Watt et al. (1996) identified this absence of ESL funding as coinciding with the "alienation" stage whereby "the abrupt withdrawal of ESL support leaves many of these students feeling insecure and unready to compete in academic courses" (p.218). They added that at this point ESL students "soon realize that they do not have the language proficiency sufficient to meet with success in these settings" (p. 218), and that "significant numbers of students felt pressured and the time premature for leaving the ESL program" (p. 218). This point was reiterated by Derwing et al.(1999) who emphasized that "in a province that places a strong emphasis on education for employability, it is incumbent upon policy makers to ensure that artificial barriers do not exist. The age cap should be eliminated for high school ESL students" (p. 545).

It appears clear that if we are to meet the needs of the ESL students here in our province, we need to ensure, in the words of Bosetti and Watt (1995) "that access to

ESL support is supplied on the basis of English language proficiency, not duration" (p. 38).

The role of the teacher in the mainstream classroom was also identified at stage six as being paramount in meeting the needs of the ESL student. It was here that Watt et al. (1996) highlighted, "mainstream classroom teachers must find ways to address the language learning needs of these students within the context of the mainstream academic class setting" (p. 218). This was augmented upon by Derwing et al. (1999) who noted that "it is vital that teachers lead by example. Conscious efforts must be made to foster understanding and support. Ideally an environment should be created in which all students perceive themselves as equal to their classmates" (p. 544). Roessingh (1995) further commented that "clearly, the teacher is the key to the successful inclusion of diverse learners in the mainstream class setting...Regular classroom teachers and ESL teachers alike must face the challenge to work in different ways and to acquire new professional skills" (p. 75).

A final area cited as important in meeting the needs of the ESL student was in the academic programming and assessment offered. Watt et al. (1996) noted that "language-learning objectives must become integral to content-area teaching" (p. 218). They further suggest that, in order to do this, classroom practices should include "offering instructions in print as well as verbally, permitting time for students to begin homework assignments in class to ensure that the work is understood, and taking charge of assigning students to groups when group work is undertaken" (p. 218). Roessingh (1999) further contended that the key to the success of the ESL student is "the development of English language proficiency using content area materials wisely and appropriately as a vehicle to advance this language development" (p. 83). She added that, in order to achieve this goal, "the language learner needs of the student must drive our instructional planning, rather than a textbook or content-driven curriculum" (p. 83). This view was supported by Derwing et al. (1999) who claimed that "a much stronger link between ESL and content curricula is necessary. In turn, schools need to explain the high school program more clearly and provide guidance in assisting students to select courses wisely and to set realistic goals" (p. 545).

Assessment practices for ESL students have also been cited as deterring this student population from meeting their educational goals. As Collier (1989) reported:

> Most comparisons of student achievement in schools are given using national norms of standardized tests. These tests are not the best measure of second language proficiency, and in the future, it is hoped that researchers may find other measures for comparisons of academic achievement (p. 527).

This problem, as noted by Bosetti and Watt (1995) is further "exacerbated by economic restraint" (p. 36). They added that "the insistence on educational accountability in terms of high levels of student achievement results in a shift of funding to programs and services that are designated as basic education" (p. 36). Bosetti and Watt offered that if we are to avoid marginalizing this student population, we need to "investigate the means by which educational outcomes for ESL instruction are to be monitored and evaluated. Assess educational accountability in terms of ESL student success" (p.38).

The needs of the ESL student are diverse and the challenges posed in meeting these needs are compounded by cutbacks to education programs and the peripheral status that ESL programs are given in many schools. As noted by Bosetti and Watt (1995), "In some instances, the limited ability of individual schools to meet the needs of ESL students have resulted in those schools refusing to identify ESL students, thus foregoing the supplementary grants" (p. 37). It does appear however that the opportunities for these students to experience success can in large part be enhanced by educators willing to aid in their socialization process. As Postman and Weingartner (1969, cited in Kanno and Applebaum, 1995) put it, "clearly there is no more important function for education to fulfill than that of helping us to recognize the world we actually live in and, simultaneously, of helping us to master concepts that will increase our ability to cope with it" (p. 47).

Sub-Problem 2

What do each of these interest groups perceive themselves to be doing to meet the pupil's needs?

It was realized shortly after the interview process began that this question posed a degree of discomfort among the participants interviewed. Participants seemed to prefer answering for the collective whole (we at Almadina) rather than as individuals or "interest groups". Thus my interview question was changed to "what sort of things do you do collectively in terms of meeting the ESL needs [of the students]?" Their responses will be better served when I address my main research question at the end of this section.

Sub-Problem 3

How are these actions different from what is being done at other schools?

Respondents stated a number of different reasons why they felt Almadina differed from other traditional schools within their district. Both principal and staff respondents indicated that the student population itself with "over fifty percent coded ESL" gives them an advantage over traditional public schools in that Almadina, unlike traditional public schools, "have the means to provide full time, qualified ESL instructors and to tailor a program that focuses on language development."

Class sizes in the literacy blocks and in the Heritage Language programs were also cited as different from those found in most public schools with the number of students in each of these classes averaging eight to twelve. As one staff member commented, "you don't see that in too many schools." The principal further commented that the actual amount of time spent in language arts was considerably more than would be spent in a traditional public school, with new ESL arrivals spending up to "eighty percent of their time working on ESL." All respondents indicated that regular class sizes were no different from those found in most other public schools which most staff participants deemed, given Almadina's student population, as still too large to meet the student's needs. They cited a need for more teacher aides which contradicted one board member's claim that, for class sizes over 25 students, "there is a number of teaching assistants to help them [the teachers]."

The fact that Almadina offers Heritage Language programs was also described by most respondents as being different from other schools within their district and was cited by most interviewees as one of the primary reasons parents opt to have their children attend this school. Also noted by most respondents was the fact that, unlike most public schools in their city, Almadina's population is mostly of one predominant culture which, despite its inherent drawbacks allows many students "to feel more comfortable." Stakeholders further indicated this allowed them to plan their ESL programming to the needs of one cultural group rather than a diverse population, a positive they claim in terms of resources, peer tutoring, and in having people available who can translate from one language to another.

The individual assessment of each student at Almadina was also a practice highlighted as unique to Almadina. This is a result of the testing that each student goes through in September (or upon entry into the school) giving each staff member at Almadina "a real clear picture of who is in each class". Student respondents also believed that they received more individualized attention at Almadina and cited past experiences to support their statements. As one student summarized, "they really care about us."

Staff meetings four nights a week is also not a common practice at many public schools, but at Almadina, the staff and administration meet every Monday through Thursday. As indicated by one staff member interviewed, "I have been in a few schools and I think the teachers work a lot harder here than you'd find in any other public school."

Given the nature of Almadina as a charter school, the actions of the board and of the parents whose children attend Almadina should be different from other public schools but as noted in the previous chapter this does not appear to be the case. Parent involvement continues to be low in this school and although most interviewees credit the Almadina school board as being much more supportive this year, interactions between the board and some of the staff members still appears suspect in terms of the support and understanding offered to one another. Remembering that this is only Almadina's fourth year of operation and the first that any structured ESL program, to speak of, has been offered, I believe that given time, these areas of concern will also be addressed in order to offer Almadina a uniqueness not seen in other traditional public or separate schools.

Sub-Problem 4

How is the Almadina Charter School an innovative site for providing ESL programming?

When I began my research on the Almadina Charter School I expected to see an established ESL program serving a number of diverse cultural groups from in and around the city in which it is located. This was not the case. What I did encounter was a very hard working and dedicated staff and administrative team, dedicated for the first time in the school's four year history to delivering an ESL program reflecting their mandate as set out in the school's charter. What Almadina now offers in terms of innovative ESL programming has only been in place since September of 1999 and how successful they will be, only time will tell. In the words of one board member "the plant is growing although we have yet to see the fruit."

This said, what Almadina currently offers in regards to innovative ESL programming is a structured ESL program based on the recommendations made in the Wiebe et al. (1999) *Growth Report* and through the work of Dr. Hetty Roessingh, whose background paper on "Delivering an English as a Second Language Program," written in the summer of 1999, helped get Almadina focused in the right direction. As identified in her paper, there are three main features which characterize the Almadina Charter School as a unique and innovative charter school.

- A structured ESL program at all levels of ESL proficiency.
- A strong language across the curriculum focus, whereby all learning settings are seen as venues for the development of English
- An Heritage Language program that addresses the Charter stipulation that Heritage Languages will be offered in support of the development of English language proficiency (p. 2)

The ESL program itself is characterized by all students being separated into literacy blocks, depending on their English proficiency level, for small group language arts instruction. This is further supported by the school's language across the curriculum focus whereby all language arts classes or literacy blocks, regardless of the level at which the student is at linguistically, work on similar themes throughout the course of the year. The Heritage Language program itself is also defined by its small class sizes which were quoted as being between "eight and ten to one."

An additional feature which characterizes Almadina as a unique and innovative ESL school is in their individual assessment of each student in order to determine his or her specific ESL needs. This, the principal stated allows Almadina to "adequately, if not very well, meet the needs of the newcomer to Canada that speaks zero English as well as someone who is perhaps gifted or talented." As well, Almadina employs three full time ESL teachers and two full time ESL aides which again the Ms. Douglas claimed "allows us to tailor a program that focuses on language development."

A final feature defining Almadina as an innovative ESL site pertains to the staff and the principal of this school. As mentioned Ms. Douglas came to Almadina this past year with twelve years of ESL experience as both a teacher and an administrator and based on the comments made by those interviewed, most would agree that the school would not be where it is today without her expertise and background knowledge. The staff have also been inserviced extensively over this past year in ESL practices and this, coupled with the hard work and dedication that they have displayed has made for an ESL program which hopefully offers innovative ESL practices which in the future can be shared with other schools or school districts with high ESL student populations.

Main Research Question

What are the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and school board members in regards to how they feel the Almadina Charter School meets the needs of the students enrolled there?

All respondent groups indicated that the programming offered at Almadina, especially the literacy blocks and language across the curriculum focus was a unique and innovative approach to meeting the needs of the ESL students enrolled there. They all cited the class sizes in these literacy blocks as small, with the average being eight to twelve students. The principal also highlighted the fact that the ESL programming is individualized in that, as the student's English language proficiency increases, the time they spend in ESL pullout groups decreases. This, respondents emphasized, was due in large part to the individual assessment of all students in the school and as Ms. Douglas claimed "we have a real clear picture of who we've got, linguistically speaking, in each of our classrooms." It was also noted by one teacher that the staff meets weekly to talk about the individual needs of all the students enrolled at Almadina and the principal indicated that all staff meet four nights a week to address the "intense ESL focus that the school has."

One board member also made mention of the fact that students receive ESL instruction based on their needs, not on their funding. Students themselves credited a caring and outgoing staff with meeting their individual needs and all student participants indicated that, if they felt extra help was needed with their schoolwork, the teachers were always there to assist. The issue of discipline, which all participants felt was a major deterrent to meeting the student's needs in past years, appears to have been addressed by the board and the administration. Teachers interviewed stated that with an established discipline policy "it has gotten much better" while most student respondents claimed that this year they "felt a lot safer."

Given the monocultural nature of the school's student population, many respondents believed that this allowed them a better opportunity to meet the student's individual needs in terms of offering more peer assistance, resources that met the need of this one cultural group, and in planning for instruction. Respondents also made reference to the fact that many students were more comfortable learning within their own cultural group, thus preventing some of the socialization issues that plague ESL students within the mainstream school setting in respect to them feeling "left out."

Staff respondents in particular questioned how effective they were in meeting student needs regarding the socialization issues of tolerance and respect for others. More than one respondent, including the superintendent, inferred that because of the traumatic backgrounds of many of the students enrolled at Almadina, a councilor was required at this school, preferably one that spoke Arabic. A further area of concern, as cited by board and staff members alike was regarding the lack of Canadian born English speaking students enrolled at the school. They felt this lack of integration may hinder the second language acquisition of some ESL students and indicated that more could be done to encourage the students of Almadina to participate in activities outside of the school in order to promote interaction with their English speaking peers.

Overall it appeared that each of the interest groups interviewed felt that they were doing as much as possible to meet the individual needs of the students enrolled at Almadina. This being said however, many respondents still expressed frustration with the lack of fiscal support on the part of the provincial government and the support they offered for the charter school movement as a whole; the lack of interaction and support by other public and separate school boards within their district and the way in which the media has portrayed this school over the past few years; and with the achievement tests that many students of this special population are forced to take, regardless of their level of English proficiency.

Recommendations

The greatest challenge facing Almadina is the short period of time that the school has, in which to demonstrate significant development of the ESL mandate (Wiebe et al., 1999, p. 21). Many of the recommendations put forth by Wiebe et al. have been addressed this year and many challenges have been overcome. It is my belief that Almadina is offering a unique and innovative ESL program and it is hoped that this school has the opportunity to continue to grow so that ESL practices can be refined in order to benefit the ESL student population as a whole.

Recommendations for Practice

Ten recommendations for those involved in the Almadina Charter School and for those monitoring their progress have emerged from the research conducted.

1. Almadina should continue to build upon ESL practices established this year under the guidance of a strong administrative team and a board supportive of the ESL programming that Almadina is trying to offer. This would include continuing to (a) accurately identify the English language proficiency of all students at Almadina, (b) use ESL student portfolios in order to track the development of their English language proficiency over time, (c) offer ESL educational support for each student, based on their profile, by placing them in the appropriate level of literacy block at

each division, (d) monitor the students progress at each level in order to meet their changing programming needs and, (e) set a language across the curriculum focus with all students working on similar themes in the literacy blocks at any given time. In accomplishing this it is recommended that the *Follow-up Action Plan to the School Growth Report* (1999) be revisited annually and priorities set at the start of every school year.

2. In their *Growth Report* (1999), Wiebe et al. recommended that "the board, in consultation with the school administration, the teaching staff and the parents identify, describe, and make explicit to students and parents the school mandate that shall receive the focus in Almadina school" (p. 18). Based on the responses of those interviewed this has yet to happen. If Almadina is to promote itself as an ESL school and not just one perceived as being an Arabic or Muslim school, perhaps with an ESL focus, it is suggested that a more concerted effort be made to increase parental, student, and public knowledge regarding what the mandate of the school is and what it is they are trying to achieve. A change in the name of the school itself (i.e. Almadina ESL Charter School) would go a long way in accomplishing this goal. The desired effect of this would be a decrease in negative public opinion, especially in terms of their published achievement exam results and an increase in attracting more culturally diverse students in order to make the "student population more reflective of [the city's] multicultural society" (Wiebe et al., 1999, p. 45).

3. Almadina should continue to make efforts to include the parents in the education of their children. As indicated by the principal's comments and through staff responses, parental involvement continues to be very low at this school with poor turnouts for parent-teacher interviews and a general lack of interest in the day to day operation of the school. As documented in Almadina's *Delivering the English as a Second Language Program* (1999), "parents must be partners with the school in order to foster the best possible second language development" (p. 3).

4. Continued efforts should be made to develop a cohesive, effective staff and administrative team by retaining those already employed and by continuing to train those whose teaching background is other than ESL in practices reflecting the school's mandate. By all indications the staff and the administration have worked very hard this year in overcoming the challenges posed by offering a new program with "an intense ESL focus." If allowed to build on what has been accomplished this year, Almadina will be in an even better position to meet the needs of the students enrolled there come the 2000-2001 school year. This in part can be accomplished by ensuring that staff morale and job satisfaction continue to improve by ensuring that discipline policies remain consistent, the resources they need to do their job can be made available, and that the efforts that they put into work is recognized by both administration and by the members of the board.

5. It is understood that budgets are what they are but it is recommended that Almadina make a more concerted effort in providing counseling services to students whose social and emotional needs are not being met. Many immigrant students come to Canada having been traumatized or simply uprooted from their previous country of residence. Given the reportedly high drop out rates among ESL students and what has been stated in the literature regarding the importance of socialization, it appears that any school wanting to offer ESL students a better chance of academic success must also be prepared to offer the social and emotional support needed to meet the diverse needs of this student population.

6. Although it appears to have improved this year it is still evident that a better understanding between the teaching staff at Almadina and the members of the Almadina school board needs to be fostered. Given that the population at Almadina is primarily ESL, the board needs to set more realistic expectations regarding what these ESL students can actually accomplish. Research indicates (Collier, 1989) that it may take from five to seven years (and longer) for ESL learners to reach the same

linguistic level as Canadian born English speaking students and achievement test scores simply are not a clear indication of what these students can do. It is recommended that indicators of growth (i.e. pre-test/post-test, portfolio work, etc.), not achievement test scores should be the measure by which the teaching staff at Almadina are judged. Furthermore it is recognized that the board members of Almadina are very busy individuals outside of the school but it appears that increased interaction, both formally and informally, between the staff and at least some of the board members, would do a lot to foster goodwill between these two groups.

7. Alberta Learning should set more realistic benchmarks for the staff and students of Almadina to strive for and these benchmarks need to be published when the achievement test score results for all schools within Almadina's jurisdiction are made public. Not only would this assist in altering the board members' expectations of staff and students but it would also increase public awareness regarding the nature of this school and take some of the pressure off the teaching staff so they can focus on the language learning needs of the students enrolled there.

8. As recommended by Bosetti et al. (2000), the government needs to "assume full responsibility for overseeing all charter schools in the province, appointing a supervisory body responsible for granting and renewing charters, for monitoring and evaluating charter schools, and for providing technical assistance and support" (p. 174). For Almadina this support is imperative if they are truly going to succeed. As a pioneer of the first publicly funded ESL school in Canada, it is recommended that Almadina receive the extensive monitoring and technical assistance required to ensure that they are heading in the right direction. It is further recommended that the government be a vocal advocate of charter schools in order to "overcome the resistance created by the Alberta School Boards Association and the Alberta Teachers' Association in allowing them a shared space in the public education system" (Bosetti et al., 2000, p. 174).

9. The school district in which Almadina is located should be encouraged to collaborate with the Almadina Charter School. If successful, Almadina will be in a position to offer innovative ESL practices for this district and others to adopt. For cities whose immigrant populations continue to grow, this may prove a substantial benefit in the future. However without any clearly defined reasons, other than a general disregard for charter schools in general, Almadina continues to be shunned by the predominant public and separate systems. Indeed Almadina's students are excluded from participating in extracurricular sporting and other special events with the students from these systems. Although it appears that all parties could benefit from what each has to offer, the clear losers in this case continue to be the students. It is highly recommended that local school jurisdictions look beyond the current perceptions held by much of the educational community in regards to charter schools and take the time to explore what Almadina is trying to accomplish.

10. Finally it is my sincere recommendation that if the Almadina Charter School continues to refine and deliver the ESL program that they are currently offering, they should have their charter renewed when it comes up for review on June 30th of 2001. It is fully understood that had I conducted my research one year ago, I would not have arrived at the same conclusion. But when one sees the effort that has gone in to delivering the unique ESL programming that was first intended in the mandate, I am of the firm belief that, if the school's charter was to be revoked, a great deal of work will have been wasted. I cannot support my belief with this school year's provincial achievement exam results as they will not be available prior to publication of this study. It is hoped however that they demonstrate an improvement over previous years results based on the changes that have occurred at the school this year.

As has been indicated, a young school with an innovative approach needs time to grow and given the history of Almadina's first three years of operation, they are already at a disadvantage. Yet all indications are that the school is heading in the right direction. Ms. Douglas made mention that the feedback received from Alberta Learning is that the programming offered at Almadina "is not easily presented in a public school." Personal communication with a representative from Alberta Learning (July 17, 2000) reconfirmed this. It was stated that Almadina appears to have made a concerted effort this year in addressing their policies and that, if they continue to do so there is a good chance there charter will be renewed come next year.

The literature indicates that there is a necessity for ESL programs designed to meet the academic and social needs of this certain population. When a school such as Almadina endeavors to do so, it should be given the opportunity and support required.

Recommendations for Theory and Future Research

Three recommendations for ESL programming theory and future research emerged from the findings in this study. Two further recommendations regarding the effectiveness of charter schools in comparison with traditional public or separate schools with similar student populations and how student achievement is measured in charter schools with special populations will also be discussed in this section.

1. Develop a mode of delivering ESL programming which meets both the social and emotional as well as the academic needs of the ESL students. Literature indicates (Kanno and Applebaum, 1995; Roessingh, 1995; Watt et al., 1996; Derwing et al., 1999) that high school ESL students are often at risk of not completing their schooling due to feelings of loneliness, frustration, anger, shyness and the stigma they feel is attached to being an ESL student. Even at the elementary level, Roessingh (2000) noted that, "under the present educational climate this type of extensive support is rarely provided" (p. 11). As a result many of these students do not reach their academic potential regardless of the ESL programming offered. It is suggested that a model for schools wishing to provide programming similar to that at Almadina be developed that has not only offers an intense ESL focus but also one which provides the social and emotional support needed to prepare these students for

reintegration into mainstream schooling. Figure 2 points out the program elements present at Almadina. It also identifies support elements which need to be added and further identifies program goals which should be attainable by covering the program and support elements.

Figure 3. **Model for Providing ESL Programming**

Program Elements

Literacy Blocks
Language across the curriculum focus
Individual assessment of students
Portfolios monitoring growth over time
ESL trained teachers and teaching assistants
Access to a variety of ESL resources

Support Elements

Counseling services
Programs on tolerance and understanding
Teachers who are aware of the social needs of ESL students
Peer tutoring
Concerted efforts to integrate ESL students with non-ESL students

Program Elements

Increased academic achievement
A decrease in drop out rates among students
A more positive school environment
An increased awareness of diversity

2. There is an absence in the literature regarding ESL schools in Canada or anywhere else in North America for that matter. It has been acknowledged that many public and separate schools with high ESL populations offer successful ESL programs that may or may not be innovative but their practices have yet to be shared so that others, like the Almadina Charter School, may draw upon their experiences. Studies of other ESL schools and the programming they provide would serve as beneficial to those schools wanting to offer similar services so that, at the very least, the challenges that they have faced can be realized and perhaps avoided. As one of the first publicly funded ESL schools in North America, it is hoped that Almadina continues to be a focus for research.

3. A further area for possible study is in providing ESL programming to one distinct cultural group as the long term effects of doing so are yet to be documented. As has been noted in the case of Almadina there appears both positive as well as negative attributes to serving one predominant cultural population. Being comfortable with ones peer group, having the ability to translate from one language to another, having the resources available to meet the needs of one distinct group of students, the potential to retain ones first language while learning a second language, and having an understanding of ones customs and religious beliefs have all been cited as advantageous in meeting the needs of the ESL students. Disadvantages however have been cited in the lack of integration with Canadian born English speaking peers, lack of tolerance and understanding of students from other cultures, and in students not being forced to engage in speaking English due to their ability to converse freely in their first language. For schools with disproportionate numbers of ESL students whose backgrounds are similar such research could prove beneficial in implementing strategies to better meet the needs of these students and in determining whether serving one population is a viable option in delivering the most beneficial ESL programming possible.

4. Some charter schools have been established by parents, educators, and special interest groups who believe that the needs of students at risk of not completing their schooling (i.e. academically challenged, underachieving, ESL learners) can best be met outside of the traditional school setting. Yet there appears to be an absence in the literature defining just how the programming offered at these charter schools can be deemed more effective than that found in other public or separate schools. As identified by Bosetti et al. (2000), without clearer expectations and criteria set up front, evaluating performance remains a challenge" (p. 165).

Interviewees in my study provided a number of responses regarding how they perceive Almadina as being more effective than traditional public or separate schools in meeting the needs of the special population enrolled there. Unfortunately, there exists little research to substantiate their claims. Comparative studies, both qualitative and quantitative, may contribute to current knowledge on the effectiveness of all charter schools and perhaps add credibility to their claims of providing programming which better meets the needs of special student populations.

5. As identified by Bosetti et al. (2000), charter schools are expected to demonstrate improved learning but "the problem is that there has not been a clear definition of what should constitute that 'student learning' or 'improvement'" (p.165). It appears clear that assessment based on achievement exams is not appropriate for charter schools with special needs populations. Studies of alternative assessment techniques, ones that measure "growth" and improvement as opposed to academic achievement are considered essential if charter schools serving at risk students are to exist and thrive in this province's current educational milieu.

Personal Reflections

This section presents my personal thoughts. It is subjective and is meant to offer my own perceptions in addition to the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this study.

When I first began my assessment of the ESL program offered at the Almadina Charter School it was with a conviction that many of the ESL students within our system were not having their educational needs met and subsequently were at a risk of not completing their schooling. Literature seemed to support this belief. Thus it was with high hopes that I approached Almadina to see if an ESL school of this nature could in fact provide services which other conventional schools in our province could not. What I found was not the ideological school I had initially envisioned but rather one serving a predominantly monocultural population which, after four years of operation was just now beginning to offer the ESL programming it had set out as part of it's charter mandate.

Disappointment gave way to reality as I began discovering the complexities of providing an innovative ESL program to close to 300 students. I decided not to dwell on Almadina's tumultuous past which was marred with high staff and administration turnover rates, a lack of effective discipline policies and a board whose interests appeared other than the best interests of the students enrolled at the school. Rather I chose to focus on where Almadina was at present. This revealed a hard working and committed staff complimented by a strong administrative team who, with the support of the present board, was working hard in providing a program offering the intense ESL focus that was originally intended for the school. It also brought me to the realization that there are distinct advantages and disadvantages to providing ESL instruction to one cultural group and that both must be weighted before passing judgment on the perceived ill effects of serving one predominant culture.

After nine months of being involved with, and assessing Almadina, I feel the ESL programming offered at this school has the potential to impact how we provide ESL services to students whose first language is other than English. I believe what is needed is the same consistency among the staff and administration that was evident last year and the support of Alberta Learning in assisting Almadina to achieve it's goals. Perhaps because I am a teacher I feel the stakeholders involved in Almadina's future need to ensure that the staff receives the moral and financial support required to both, keep them at Almadina and to allow them to do, from what I could tell, a difficult and demanding job.

Based on the responses of those interviewed and my own personal views, it is my perception that once the academic program has been refined at Almadina they need to make a more concerted effort in meeting the social and emotional needs of the students enrolled there. Unlike my previous belief in regards to ESL programming, I now realize that when working with ESL students their emotional, and not just their academic needs have to be seriously considered if they are to reach their full academic potential. Almadina furthermore needs to ensure that support is in place to provide for the transition from this ESL school to the high schools that the students will be attending in order to minimize the risk of alienation, as identified by Watt et al. (1996).

Finally I guess what Almadina needs most right now is the time in which to continue to grow and the processes put in place to ensure that they are being held accountable during this growth process. Much of this is in the hands of the government whose support, or lack thereof, will in large part determine the future of Almadina and of charter schools as a whole.

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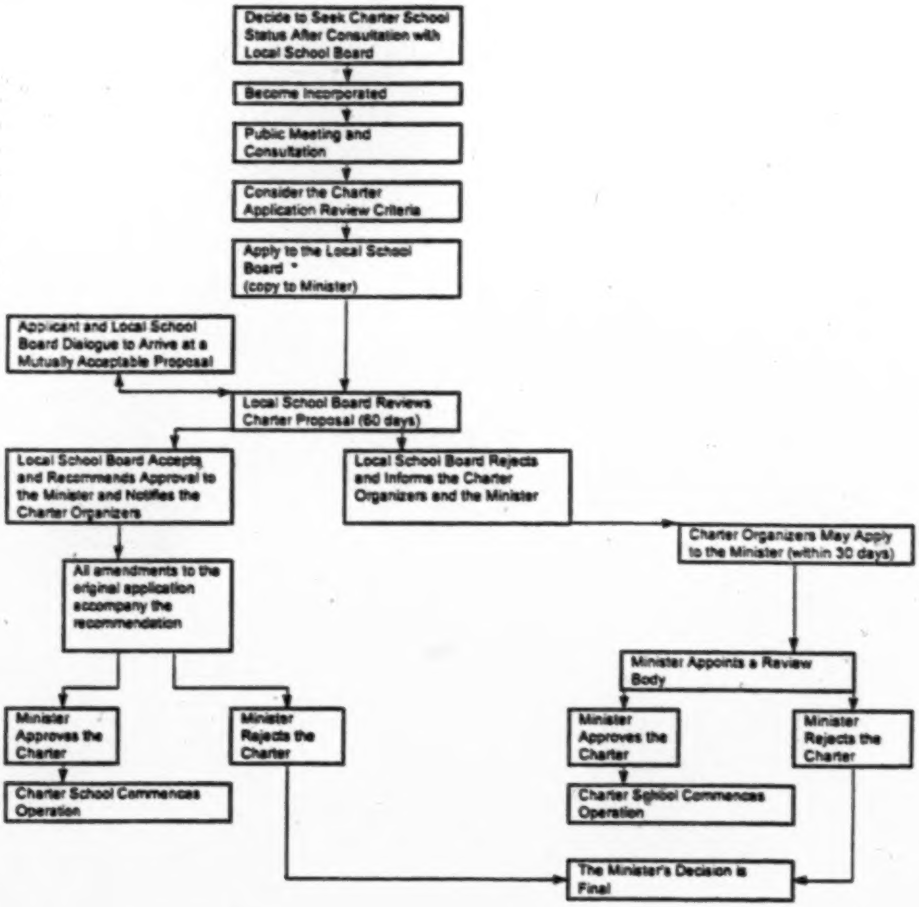
Appendix A

The following flow chart summarizes the steps which lead to the establishment of a charter school.


Decide to Seek Charter School Status After Consultation with Local School Board
Become Incorporated
Public Meeting and Consultation
Consider the Charter Application Review Criteria
Apply to the Local School Board *
(copy to Minister)
Applicant and Local School Board Dialogue to Arrive at a Mutually Acceptable Proposal
Local School Board Reviews Charter Proposal (60 days)
Local School Board Accepts and Recommends Approval to the Minister and Notifies the Charter Organizers
Local School Board Rejects and Informs the Charter Organizers and the Minister
Charter Organizers May Apply to the Minister (within 30 days)
All amendments to the original application accompany the recommendation
Minister Appoints a Review Body
Minister Approves the Charter
Minister Rejects the Charter
Minister Approves the Charter
Minister Rejects the Charter
Charter School Commences Operation
Charter School Commences Operation
The Minister's Decision is Final

*The application is to be submitted
six(6) months prior to intended school opening date.

Charter School Handbook (1996, p. 8)

Appendix B

Invitation to Participate

Rick Angus
Department of Education Policy Studies
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta
T6G-2G5

[Date]

Consent to Participate in Research Study [**Principal, Staff, Board Members**]

Dear [**Principal, Staff, Board Members**]

My name is Rick Angus and I am a teacher with the Edmonton Public School Board, currently on leave for one year. Being a graduate student at the University of Alberta, I am conducting a study on the perceptions of the principal, staff, students and board members of the Almadina Charter School regarding how you perceive the Almadina Charter School is meeting the needs of the students enrolled there.

It is hoped that this study will shed light on reasons why families opt to have their children attend this school rather than attend public or separate schools which may be closer to their homes. I also hope to provide insights into the reasons, if any, why staff and board members feel that programming at Almadina is meeting the needs of students enrolled there differently than were these students enrolled in public or separate schools.

This study has been designed to provide insights into the effectiveness of the Almadina Charter School as an innovative site for offering ESL programming and I hope that this study may provide public or separate school boards with some programming alternatives which may compliment their existing ESL services, especially those with large ESL populations. I also expect that this research will contribute to what appears to be a somewhat limited bank of knowledge in terms of the operation and organization of charter schools here in Alberta, the nature of ESL programs offered here in Canada and, how these programs are meeting the needs of students at risk of not completing their schooling.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to commit yourself to an informal interview of approximately one hour sometime in late April, discussing questions which will address the area of study mentioned above. If consent is given, all interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. Transcriptions will be returned to you for further clarification, feedback, and follow-up discussion prior to publication of my results and following conclusion of my results, both my transcriptions and audiotapes will be returned to you.

Should you choose to participate in this study you will have the right to opt out at any time. For those who follow through, copies of my research results will be made available to you.

All research will be carried out in a professional manner, with the intention of presenting as truthful and as clear a picture of your perceptions in regards the Almadina Charter School and how you feel it is meeting the needs of the students enrolled there. Except in the case of the principal who has already agreed to be identified, I will ensure anonymity of all participants and you will be given the opportunity to look over drafts prior to publication to ensure confidentiality requirements have been met.

If at any time before or during this study, you have questions or concerns or simply need further clarification regarding the research to be conducted both myself and my advisor can be contacted at the following:

Researcher: Rick Angus
Phone: (780) 435-0645 (H)
(780) 492-5334 (W)
E-mail: langus@telusplanet.net

Supervisor: Dr. Frank Peters, University of Alberta
Ed. Admin. and Policy Studies
Phone: (780) 492-7607 FAX: (780) 492-2024

I sincerely hope you decide to participate in this study. It will require a time commitment on your part but it is hoped that the results will be well worth the effort. If you choose to take part, please return your signed consent form, which confirms you are familiar with the contents of this letter, understand the purpose of this study and the procedures, and that you are volunteering as a willing participant keeping in mind any risks and/or benefits which you perceive may be derived as a result of this study. I look forward to speaking with you in the near future!

Sincerely,

Rick Angus

I,____________________________acknowledge that I consent to participate in the study described.

Signed:_________________________ Date:___________________________

Appendix C

Interview Schedule (Revised)

Demographics:

1. Are you from Calgary? Did you attend university here in Calgary?

2. Do you have family here?

3. How long have you been teaching at Almadina? What grade or subject are you currently teaching? What other grades have you taught since being here?

4. Where have you taught prior to coming to Almadina? (ESL teaching experience?)

Essential Questions

1. What makes the Almadina Charter School unique? How do you feel that it is an innovative site for providing ESL programming? What do you see as being the objectives of the programming here?

- **Can you provide examples? (probe)**

2. How do you feel the English as a Second Language (ESL) programming offered at your school differs from that offered in the public or separate school system?

- **Can you provide specific examples? (probe)**

3. What changes have you seen at the Almadina Charter School since you have been here? (probe)

4. What are the needs of the ESL students in your school?

5a. What do you feel is being done at Almadina to meet the needs of the ESL students enrolled at your school?

- **Can you provide examples? (probe)**

5b. How do you (students) feel that your ESL needs are being met at the Almadina Charter School?

6. Do you see the student population at Almadina becoming more diverse in the future? Why or why not?

7. Do you feel that staffing is currently adequate to meet the needs of this ESL

population?

8. Do you feel you have the resources or the financial support for meeting the needs of the students enrolled here?

9a. Overall do you feel that Almadina is preparing the students well for reintegration into mainstream schooling?

9b Are these students less at risk of not completing their schooling as a result of having attended this school?

Appendix D

Sample of Partial Interview Transcript

Joanna Douglas, Principal

I: So in terms of your belief in Almadina as an innovative school for ESL programming, how do you feel Joanna that Almadina is providing innovative practices for ESL?

A: I think we are a charter school, we're publicly funded, but we're in a situation where the majority of our students, well not the majority, fifty percent of our students are ESL. So you can, when you've got that size of group, within a school, you can tailor a program for them. The problem out there is that alot of schools have a small percentage of ESL students and it's hard to meet their needs because it's impossible to have a full time qualified ESL teacher for a handful of kids. So here we're in a situation where we have 300 children and though only slightly less than fifty percent are actually coded ESL, through Alberta Learning, many of them come from backgrounds where they have gone through the process of learning a second language, that being English. So we have 300 children in that situation and we're able to use our resources accordingly and the program that we put together here, we do have the means to provide full time, qualified, ESL instructors and also to tailor a program, that focuses on the language development. So what we've done is throughout the school, there is a school wide focus on language development of the first language and the second language, so whether it's Arabic or French as the first language and English as the second language. And the other aspect of the program is that we're able to adequately, if not very well meet the needs of the newcomer to Canada that speaks zero English and someone gifted and talented perhaps, like Nora. Because the language arts classes are scheduled all at the same time and we have all hands on deck at that time. Teaching assistants are teaching language blocks along with the librarian and so forth, to bring down the numbers, so that you have a lower ratio, ten to one and there's a school wide planning of themes, throughout all the lit blocks. So though the delivery of the language arts class might be at varying levels, the theme is still the same so that when they go back to their homeroom, well what are you guys studying? We're studying animals, so are we, Ok. So the students have been very receptive to the ability based grouping that we've done in our language arts classes. So you can see that it would be difficult if you only have a couple of ESL students within a class. Now we've had, this year we've gone through extensive ___ with Alberta Learning and the word from them is indeed, you are providing a program that is not easily presented in a traditional public school setting because you don't have the numbers. On the other hand, we have had to give up other services because we want to spend every extra cent we have on funding our ESL program and our language arts program. To have three full time ESL specialists, takes alot and we have three teaching assistants, that they specialize in helping the ESL program and or providing bilingual education as well. We have one bilingual teaching assistant who speaks Arabic and English obviously. So that was Alberta Learning's comment, that indeed the shape and format of the program could not be delivered in a school kind of thing.

I: How do you feel Alberta Learning, how are they monitoring the school right now? Is it in terms of assessment or is in terms of support? Where do you see Alberta Learning's role, given what's been happening this year?

A: So as you know I started this position in September, and this school has been in existence for three and a half years, a little more over three and a half years. And I think when the school was first started, or when the idea of the school first started, I mean it was a wonderful idea because I myself have taught in traditional public schools with a number of ESL students and felt frustrated because I didn't feel their needs were being met. Not anyone's fault, just couldn't be met in the scheduling format of the school and so forth. So I think parents were feeling that way and some of the founding members of the school were feeling the same way and they thought they could do something better. And went ahead and formulated a plan of starting a school that would have a focus on language development for these types of students. But I think as you might imagine, the whole process of starting a school, from scratch basically, is a difficult process and in the first three years of this school, and I don't think they were alone. I think other charter schools had their own kinds of difficulties when starting off in those initial years. And I think schools have to go through a maturation process and this school had a few very difficult years and I think that also, because taxing problems of simply starting a school, ended up in the focus on the ESL being removed. It was basically a survival situation and last year it was evident that the focus of ESL was no longer a focus and that was against why the charter school was even created, this charter school. So there was a need pointed out by Alberta Learning and those people who were at the school - teachers, administration, parents. Goodness, it's time to regroup here and re-evaluate what we're doing and get back on track with the original intent of the school. And that message was very clear from the ministry as well. You were given your charter for this reason, it's time to get back to that place and so with the help of people like Dr. Rozing and David Watt, a school evaluation was done last year. Russ Weeb's consulting organization came in here and took a look at basically the organization of the school. Not necessarily the lack or existence of an ESL program, but just the other issues that were plaguing the school. And I think some of those measures were critical in turning the school around and this year a strict adherence to the recommendations made in the growth report, for basic school matters, i.e.. discipline, student pride, class organization, the physical location of the school, how the school is set up. For example at one point the elementary classes and the junior high classes were all together. You'd have a grade one class and next door you'd have a grade seven class. And so there were many very sensible suggestions made from the work of Russ Weeb and his colleagues. So I think when those basic concerns were met, then you know it became possible to re-focus and create the type of unique ESL program that the school had wanted to present originally. So the monitoring that has taken place, Alberta Learning has come in twice. They came in November for about four days and came again in March, for a couple of days and I think that they spoke with board members, parents and teachers and of course students and so forth. And I think they felt quite comfortable that a change had happened for the better and that the focus of the school was back on the ESL language instruction. And some of the other concerns that were problematic for the school were being addressed. So of course you're an experienced teacher and I'm sure that when you walk through the school, you realize that we're not at nirvana yet. That we do still have our work cut out for us but as with any school we have to go through the process and it takes time.

I: Basically Joanna, why do you see alot of the parents sending their students to Almadina as opposed to their neighborhood schools? Is it primarily because of the ESL program that's been presented here or what are your thoughts?

A: That's changing. I think originally the kinds of students that started here, even though originally the school was going to be a school that focused on ESL, I think that the students that came here were looking for a comfortable place. So you know that the majority of our students are from the middle East and I think that parents felt comfortable that there were students from other countries from the Middle East, who understood their culture, who understood their religion, their values and so forth. And so I think that's another reason why the school got away from it's original intent of working on language development. And here we are in year four and we've refocused our energies on ESL and I find as I go through the registration process for next year, that we are getting more parents that call for the reason of the charter, that this is an ESL school. They've recently moved here from..I just had a call ten minutes ago from a gentleman who just moved here from Lebanon and his ECS child in grade one, don't speak English and this is the place for them. So I think with the clearer definition of what the schools all about, I think we are attracting the kinds of students that are the best fit for this school. But we still do have that other group and I think it's good for us because we have a group of individuals, such as Nora, who's fluent in English, fluent in Arabic, excellent student. Very acclimatized to the Calgary situation, here to act as role models for someone who's just come from another country. So there's two distinct groups I think, there are the students who come here because they want the ESL instruction and they know that we're doing our best to provide a cutting edge program. And then the other group who they want their children to carry on, studying their first language, Arabic. So we offer heritage language programs, reading and writing. Listening, speaking Arabic and they also want their children to I think continue to have a price in their background and their parents former country of residence. So there are two groups here.

Appendix E

Overview of the Almadina ESL Program Plan

A. Background Statement
- The catalyst for an ESL Charter School

B. Introduction
- Demographic profile
- Unique ESL features of Almadina Charter School

C. **Mission Statement**

D. Beliefs About Second Language Acquisition

E. Questions Parents Ask

F. A framework for developing academic proficiency (From BICS to CALP)

G. ESL at Almadina: A Three Pronged Approach
- An identifiable/structured ESL program
- Alberta curriculum at Almadina: language across the curriculum
- Heritage language arts program to support ESL development

  1. The identifiable structured ESL program

  2. The Alberta Curriculum at Almadina
     - Curriculum as a vehicle for English language development
     - Curricular modifications
     - Successful teaching practices to promote ESL across the curriculum
     - Assessment considerations

  3. The Heritage Language Program
     - Basic conversational
     - Ongoing development for academic proficiency

H. Successful Teaching Practices at Almadina

I. Assessment Considerations

J. Learners with Special Needs

K. The Timetable

L. References